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January 2015

## Public Culture

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### Celebrities and Publics in the Internet Era

Sharon Marcus, Guest Editor

Essays by

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### Celebrities and Publics in the Internet Era

An issue of *Public Culture* (27:1)

Sharon Marcus, guest editor

How have new digital media platforms such as search engines, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube qualitatively changed celebrity culture? Drawing on a wide range of examples—from the luxury selfies of micro-celebrities like Kane Lim to performance artist Marina Abramović's collaborations with Jay-Z and Lady Gaga, from the karaoke standard in shows like *American Idol* to Syrian singer Assala's media battle with the Assad regime, from the "emotion economy" of reality TV to the influence of network entrepreneurs like Tim O'Reilly—the essays in this special issue identify core structural features that contribute to the development of a new theory of celebrity. \$15

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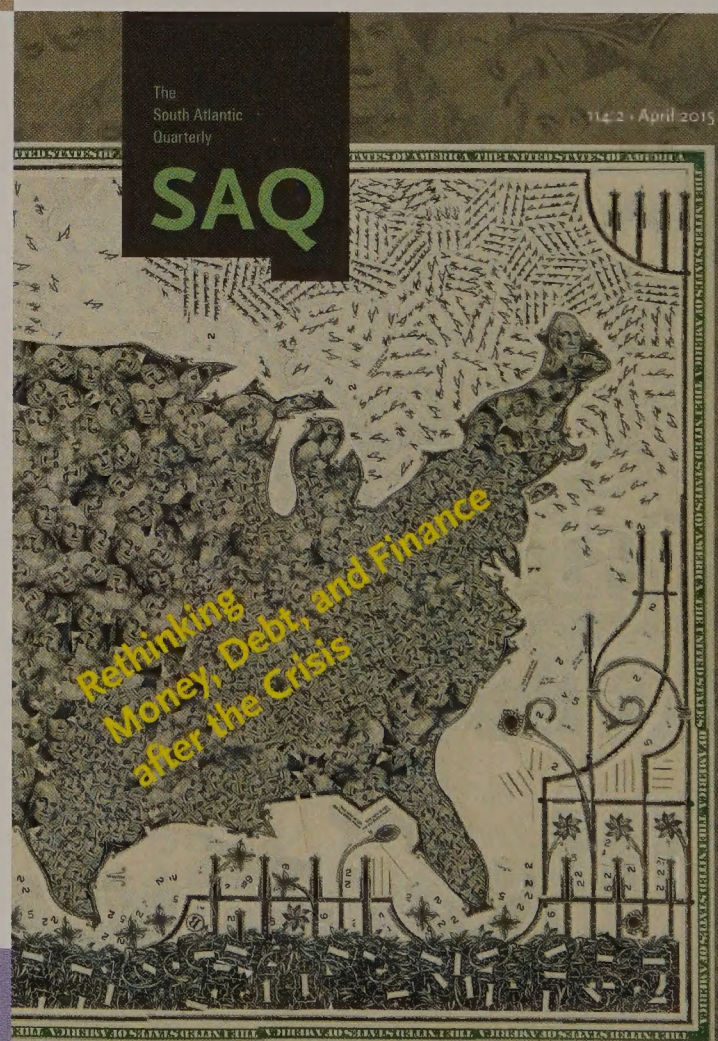
### Rethinking Money, Debt, and Finance after the Crisis

An issue of *SAQ* (114:2)

Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings, guest editors

The financial crisis of 2007–8 has been widely understood as a result of the financial system's exceeding its proper place in society: the system became unbalanced, unsustainable, and deprived of a solid foundation. Characterizing finance as fundamentally irrational, however, neglects the growing connection between the worlds of high finance and consumer credit. The essays in this special issue take the financial crisis as an opportunity for much-needed conceptual innovation. Its contributors move beyond strictly moralistic criticisms of financialization to rethink core economic categories such as money, speculation, measure, value, and the wage, as well as the relationship among labor, finance, and money. \$16

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# LETTERS

## Maybe We Can't

The query in the title of David Bromwich's meditation on Barack Obama's presidency ["What Went Wrong?," Essay, June] cannot be satisfactorily explored without reckoning with the many liberal Democrats who believed that Obama would be a transformative or uniquely beneficent political figure in the first place.

Obama's distaste for controversy, his conventionality, and the banal divergence of his actions and words were apparent from the beginning of his center-left campaign. Certain observers at that time were not enchanted by the candidate whom *Advertising Age*, without apparent irony, dubbed Marketer of the Year in 2008. Ralph Nader noted that Obama had "raised far more money than John McCain from Wall Street interests, corporate interests, and, above all, corporate lawyers," and then wisely admonished Obama's voters to "prepare to be disappointed." Nothing "went wrong" with Obama's presidency—the mystery worth investigating is why there were not more skeptics on the scene.

C. Ronk  
New York City

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David Bromwich's essay on the president's many failures contains some truth, but fails to acknowledge two points: first, the many challenges that Obama faced as a leader attempting to work by consensus rather than decree; second, the impact of a lifetime as a black American. The decisiveness of George W. Bush or Lyndon B. Johnson was missing from this presidency, but how easy would it have been for a person with Obama's history to act from a position of strength? Obama came to office by building consensus, and his moderate-minded approach to governing is now a critical legacy.

Jennifer Riedl Cross  
Williamsburg, Va.

David Bromwich responds:

Racism is one source of the relentless opposition that many of Obama's proposals and policies have faced. But whatever the content of the insults, Bill Clinton met with a political opposition comparable in its ferocity. If Obama studied this recent history, he seems not to have learned from it. He referred to the impeachment of Clinton as mere partisan bickering, and in 2010, 2012, and 2014 affirmed his trust that the Republican "fever" soon would "break." The evasion points to something



more unusual than the moderate temperament of a consensus-builder. It suggests a delusion—a fixed false belief. Though Obama gave early signs of his tendency to placate opponents on all sides, nobody could have guessed how thorough a pattern it would become. And the record is contradictory. He showed a prudential respect for the Wall Street orthodoxy in naming his economic team, but he instructed that team to devise a plan for dissolving Citigroup, and then neglected to follow up when his directive was ignored. He carried forward George W. Bush's secretary of defense, Robert Gates—a step beyond prudence—but later appointed Chuck Hagel. He had lawyers draw up sophisticated rationales for drone killings and the NATO war on Libya that did not depend on congressional approval, and yet he originally nominated Dawn Johnsen (a person very unlikely to have agreed to those rationales) to head the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel. Obama withdrew support for her only when the confirmation looked like a hard fight. Why pretend that the extent of his reluctance to fight for things he said he believed in was somehow in the cards all along? It seems to have surprised even him.

### Citizen Feign

Rachel Nolan's story, "Displaced in the D.R." [Letter from the Dominican Republic, May], was well researched and important, but I question whether it was best served by a non-Latino writer. Nolan admits that her ethnic identity was problematic when she says that locals found it "rich" that a white American was traveling to the Dominican Republic to write about an act of racial injustice. Are there no Latino or Dominican-American writers qualified to handle such an assignment? In the ethnicity and nationality of its writer, Nolan's article subtly embodies the culturally sanctioned racial myopia that it critiques.

Considering that we do not live in a world where "color blindness"

leads to actual diversity, I encourage publications such as *Harper's* to make a more conscious effort to foster that diversity.

Carlos Hiraldo  
New York City

*Rachel Nolan responds:*

While reporting in the Dominican Republic, I dropped by a bookstore in Santo Domingo and began chatting with the store clerk about the court decision that made 210,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent stateless. I told him it was a topic that I, as an outsider, approached with some caution. The clerk recommended that I handle it "with pincers" or, better yet, avoid it altogether. Dominicans, many of whom travel back and forth to visit family in the United States, are well aware of stop-and-frisk, the pervasiveness of U.S. police brutality, and racial profiling for the purposes of deportation. They asked, why come all the way to the Dominican Republic to write about racism?

A Latin American writer might not have attracted the same hostility or puzzlement during the reporting. The story, however, was about denationalized Dominicans, not the race of the author. I am aware of how I'm perceived when I report stories abroad, but I am much more aware that white North Americans are too often the protagonists of stories about Latin America.

### Corrections

"The Magic Toilet" [Sallie Tisdale, Annotation, June] included the World Bank and the World Health Organization in a list of funding sources for Sanergy, an NGO. The information was provided by a spokesperson for Sanergy, but the NGO does not in fact receive funding from these organizations.

Antonia Juhasz's article "Thirty Million Gallons Under the Sea" [Report, June] misidentified a device on the *Alvin* sub. It is a carbon dioxide scrubber, not an oxygen scrubber.

We regret the errors.

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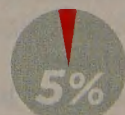


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# EASY CHAIR

In the Shadow of the Storm

By Rebecca Solnit

Ten years ago this month, on the day Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, I was at Camp Casey, an informal encampment outside George W. Bush's Crawford ranch, listening to a group of veterans talk about their opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By chance, it was also the day my first feature for *Harper's Magazine* went to press, an essay about how people react in the wake of major urban disasters. It wasn't until the following Easter that I went to New Orleans for the first of at least two dozen post-storm visits. The water had receded by then, and the houses had been searched by teams who left what became a familiar mark throughout the city: a big spray-painted x with data written in each of its four quadrants about who and what had been found inside, when they'd been found, and whether they were found alive or dead. On one boxy white two-story house on Deslonde Street, the word BAGHDAD was also painted.

When I first visited that house, the city around it felt dead. Whether New Orleans would ever come back to life was one question. What kind of life might come back was another. Some people had fled before the hurricane hit, thinking they were only leaving for a few days. Others rode out the storm and then departed for what they knew would be an open-ended exile. Michael White, a jazz clarinetist and a professor at Xavier University, was among the former. After a few months in Houston, he came back to the wrecked, largely abandoned

city that his family had called home for generations. As he told me recently, he returned to a profound loss of the past and deep uncertainty about the future. His home, near the breach of the London Avenue Canal, was almost completely submerged. The flooding destroyed a collection of musical material so rich and complex it took him several minutes to describe it: 5,000 CD recordings, 1,000 vinyl records, 4,000 books, 50 clarinets, historic photographs, sheet music, a Louis Armstrong film library, and a trove of artifacts related to early jazz greats such as Sidney Bechet.

Growing up in New Orleans, White, who is now sixty, went to school with Fats Domino's children. Both a distinguished musician and a historian of New Orleans, he was befriended by and played with musicians born between 1890 and 1910, from whom he gathered the stories and sounds of the birth of jazz. In Houston he feared that the cultural continuity of his native city might be shattered, that New Orleans might never come back. His collection never would. And his octogenarian mother, devastated and strained by the destruction, died in exile.

People like White's mother, of whom there were many, are not counted as part of Katrina's death toll, but perhaps they should be. "Katrina" is less the name of a storm than it is a shorthand for a series of largely man-made catastrophes: the lack of an evacuation plan for the poorest and most vulnerable people in the city; the regularly predicted failure of the levees

maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the inadequate emergency management of city, state, and federal government; and the corruption and bureaucratic delays that hindered the rebuilding process. The "Baghdad" graffiti was a reminder that the two places were devastated by the same regime—and a suggestion, perhaps, that in the wake of the storm poor black New Orleanians were often treated like enemies.

Katrina and its aftermath can seem impossibly remote. The Bush Administration was then at the height of its powers; political dissent was largely silenced in the name of patriotism while those who thought we could win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still loud and confident. But disasters often undermine the credibility of people in power, and Katrina did a fine job of revealing the callousness and cluelessness of the administration, from the president to Michael Brown, the cheerfully unqualified head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Today, Brown is nearly as distant a memory as the image of George W. Bush as a competent centrist.

In another way, however, that time remains uncomfortably close, because it was the beginning of a series of spectacularly public episodes of American racism. As they were in Baltimore, in Ferguson, in Sanford, Florida, and in many other places recently, unarmed black people were shot by police and vigilantes in storm-soaked New Orleans. A vast population of mostly



African-American New Orleanians was trapped on the rooftops and elevated freeways of a sweltering city that was 80 percent underwater and bereft of electricity and nearly all commerce and services. They were portrayed by the government and the media as too savage and dangerous to rescue or to allow to leave the city. New Orleans became a prison. The media fell back on the usual disaster tropes of looting, raping, and marauding hordes, and proved eager to demonize black people rather than see them as vulnerable victims of a catastrophe. They made news out of rumors, many of which turned out to be entirely baseless, about people shooting at helicopters from rooftops and corpses from imaginary bloodbaths piling up in the Superdome.

When I returned in February 2007, the Baghdad house looked unchanged. Its windows and doors were still missing, and there were weeds and wreckage all around. But I saw a man on a ladder working on the place. In June of that year, I found that the house had been painted a crisp white. It had a neat lawn and new windows, and the doors and staircase had been repaired. On the wall hung a banner for Common Ground Relief, an organization founded after Katrina by former Black Panther Malik Rahim and other activists. Common Ground was an improvisational organization of the sort that disasters often beget, a group that was able to respond to changing needs and local particulars better than the top-down organizations that arrived from outside. It began as a supply center in the Lower Ninth Ward, the mostly black neighborhood where the Baghdad house stands, but soon added a clinic providing medical care where none was available. It eventually expanded its mandate to gutting and rebuilding houses, coordinating and housing armies of young, radical volunteers, and providing job training.

The storm lifted up some lives and tossed others around and smashed them. Some people picked up where they left off, particularly

those in the older, more affluent "sliver by the river" above the flood levels. Some found their lives taking another direction. Five years after the storm, the black population of New Orleans had fallen by more than one hundred thousand. Some who fled found good lives elsewhere; others did not but couldn't afford to come home. There is no clear or easy story about Katrina's consequences for New Orleans. It traumatized many of those who survived; it caused the death of nearly 2,000 people directly and many others indirectly. It also shocked a stagnant, corrupt city that was suffering a slow economic and demographic decline into reforming itself.

Naomi Klein coined the term "disaster capitalism" to describe the opportunistic way that free-market evangelists use crises to push their agenda. There was certainly some of that happening in New Orleans, where a conservative elite took advantage of the storm to convert the entire public school system to charter schools and fire all the unionized teachers, to shut down the city's vast housing projects, and to close one of the country's oldest public hospitals. (Neither the hospital nor the housing projects were seriously damaged by Katrina.) But Klein's term doesn't capture the full picture of what happens after a disaster, which is less a conquest than a conflict over who will determine the future.

The elites don't always win. New Orleans has seen a number of progressive victories over the past decade. Exposure of the murderous corruption of the New Orleans police force resulted in a federal overhaul of the department. Alternative institutions like Common Ground still serve the needy. Katrina energized New Orleanians not just to reclaim their city but to rethink it.

The civic engagement of old-timers and newcomers alike has given the city an unprecedented dynamism, a practical democracy that's rare elsewhere in the country. People in New Orleans always did show up: for parties and parades, for christenings and funerals, and for neigh-

bors' barbecues. A great many people have a deep sense of place and local history. They talk convivially with strangers and cultivate a wide set of acquaintances in the city. Now they show up in force when policy is being made and the city's future is being charted.

Prisca Weems, an environmental scientist who has the confounding title of stormwater manager for the city, is trying to figure out how to build resilient water-diversion systems for the next century. That means engaging with climate change, coastal erosion, rising oceans, and the ways that the city's storm water and groundwater have been mismanaged since the late 1800s.

For more than a century, New Orleans had been at war with the water that surrounds it. The groundwater that remained in its marshy center was pumped out, deepening a below-sea-level basin that rainstorms and breached canals filled all too easily. At the same time, the city had pulled water in to ease shipping—notably through the Industrial Canal, which cut the Lower Ninth Ward off from the rest of the city and flooded that neighborhood during Katrina, and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, nicknamed the Hurricane Highway, which gave cargo ships and storm surges from the Gulf a shortcut to the city. The outlet also allowed salt water to reach the swamp cypresses that had served as surge buffers; their skeletal white stumps still stand on the far side of the levees at the north end of the Lower Ninth Ward. The Hurricane Highway was shut down in 2007, and a system of barriers has been built to replace it. Just as China built walls to keep out human invaders, so New Orleans now has its own great wall to keep out the water, what Weems calls a "one-hundred-thirty-three-mile perimeter-defense system, with levees, flood walls, pump stations, and gated structures."

Weems told me that New Orleans is now hoping to take advantage of water in the city instead of being forever at war with it. Large numbers of New Orleanians routinely talk about subjects like hydrological management and study maps of potential



transformation. It's the rare urban area in which many citizens have become avid urbanists. Weems praised the city's populist approach to recovery. "We had the downside of taking longer to recover," she said, "but the upside was citizen engagement in planning processes, in discussing the future not only in the city but in specific neighborhoods. The government is accountable to the citizens of this city in a way it wasn't before. We have worked hard to shape the future." Post-Katrina New Orleans, she added, "was like a viral laboratory."

I'm not sure when the new houses started going up around the Baghdad house. In 2008, the place stood alone. By June 2010, a bright-pink house on stilts stood next door. It, too, had a Common Ground banner on its balcony. Lately, dozens of colorful new houses have gone up nearby. (They're known locally as Brad Pitt houses, after the founder of the Make It Right foundation, the non-profit that built them.) These houses are architecturally adventurous and ecologically sound, with solar panels above and stilts below that are built to ride out the next flood. There is a new energy in the city, albeit one that leaves some people out—it has raised housing prices, hurting those who've been left behind in the new economy. The Make It Right houses were subsidized for returning residents of the Lower Ninth; many others displaced by the storm could not find their way through the bureaucracy that was supposed to help pay for rebuilding or find funds to reclaim their homes. The neighborhood now includes a hundred pink, orange, green, blue, and yellow Make It Right homes, as well as a lot of green space where houses used to be tightly packed. It's become a de facto wildlife refuge, thanks to the unpopulated landscape and its position near the bayous on the edge of town.

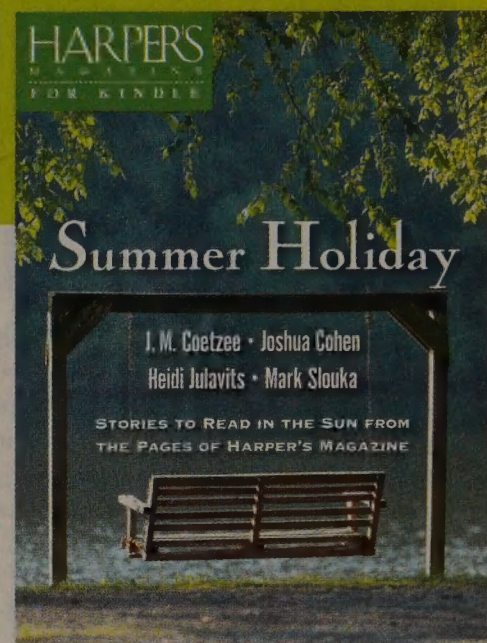
In 2007, I interviewed an older woman from the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower Ninth. She was one of the losers in Katrina's reshuffle. Her house was swamped in several feet of water, her family was scattered, and her job as a

high-school teacher had been eliminated. At the time, she was fiercely determined to rebuild her home and to reclaim her life, but wading through the bureaucracy and living in a ruined neighborhood had worn on her. She still lives in her house, but when I asked her recently about the past eight years, she said, "Oh, honey, I don't want to talk about all that, about the devastation. I want all that behind me."

After Michael White came back, he oversaw the gutting, cleaning, and restoring of his house, but he found he could not live there. He had nightmares about water, and about friends who'd drowned nearby. "Some people are back to where they were before, or better," he told me. "Some are not quite back yet. I bought a house four years ago, but I'm not quite back yet, and I'm trying like hell to get back. In the next year or two I'll be able to get to a state of normalcy, though I realize things will never be the same." New Orleans is in transition, he said, and it is still impossible to know how the changes will affect the social clubs, brass bands, jazz funerals, and second lines of the city. White is still teaching and playing music in New Orleans and on the road, and he is still a conduit between the old world of the early twentieth century and the present. But he lost something.

Disasters begin suddenly; they never exactly end. You might be cured of your cancer, but you can never again be the person who never had cancer. New Orleans on August 28, 2005, was a city in many kinds of trouble. The fallout from the storm prompted soul-searching, transformation, and reform. Many things have been gained in the years since, but only after so much was lost. And so many. The city is in the process of becoming another place, and the answer to whether that's a good or a bad thing will always be—both. There's a garden across the street from the Baghdad house; it's green and Edenic, but it's also where several people had homes before they got swept away. ■

# Summer Holiday



A Kindle eBook featuring fiction from the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, with stories by

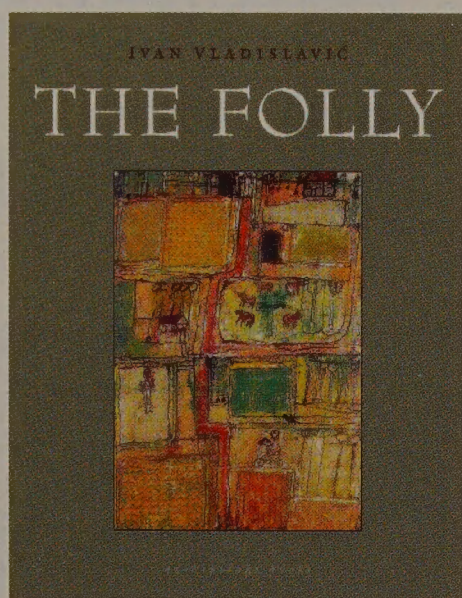
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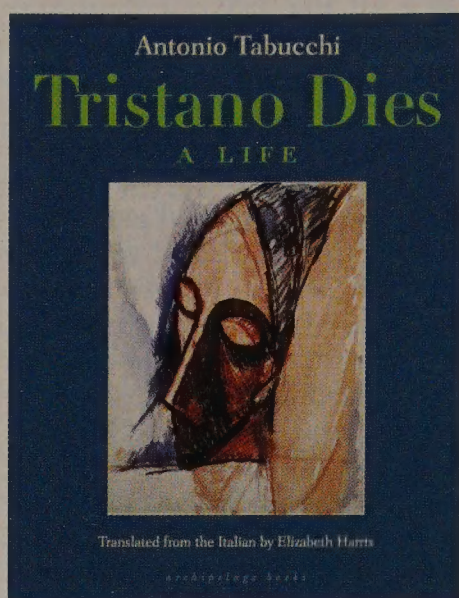


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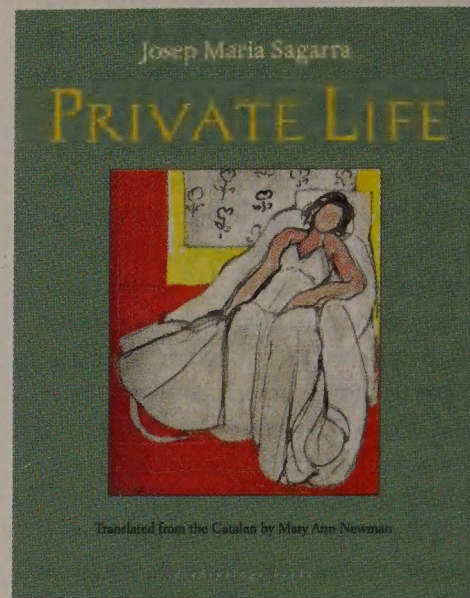
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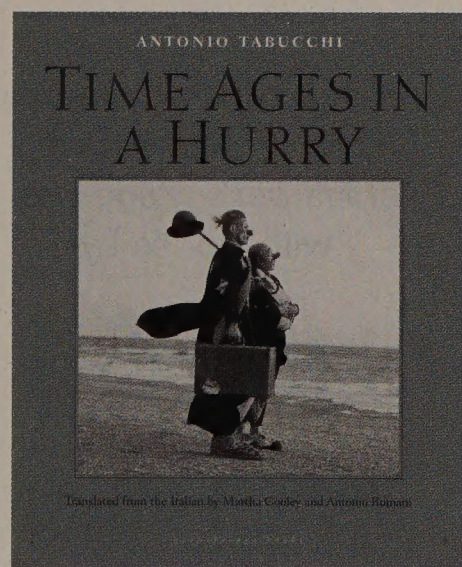
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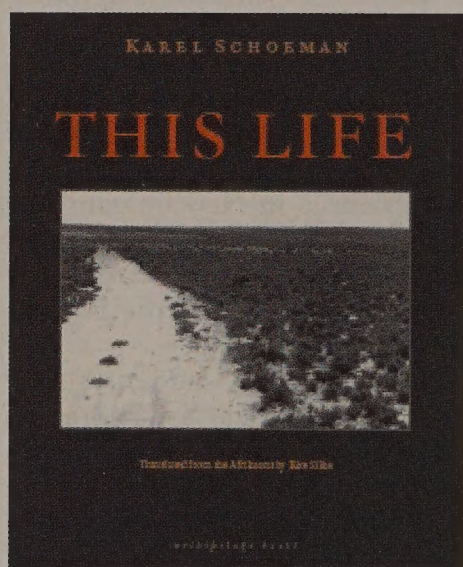
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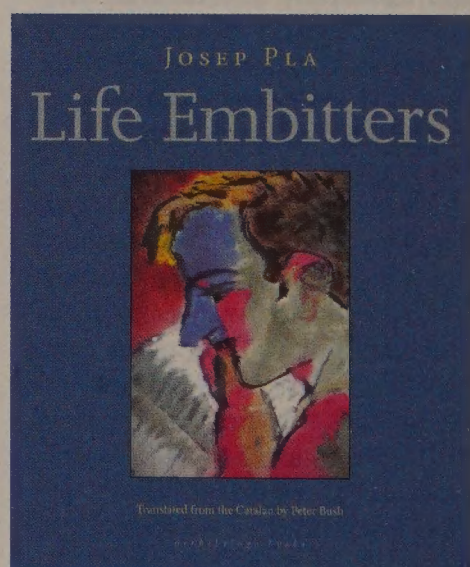
There is in Tabucchi's stories the touch of the true magician, who astonishes us by never trying too hard for his subtle, elusive, and remarkable effects.

*The San Francisco Examiner*



The Schoeman protagonists are slender, quiet, almost invisible. One of the author's most striking skills is his ability to turn these lethargic figures, so distant from their own inner lives and needs, into objects of empathy.

*The Wall Street Journal*



Josep Pla was a great noticer of things and places; his gaze was alert and dry; he wrote in a style which registered both the smallest detail and the large picture... A glittering and sparkling sensibility.

COLM TÓIBÍN



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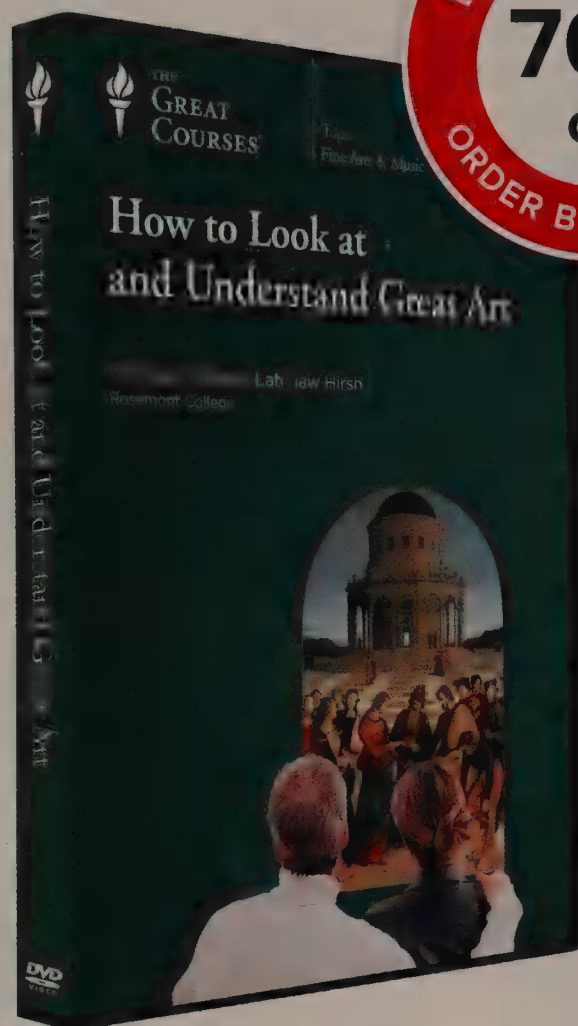
# HARPER'S INDEX

- Factor by which the average salary in the securities industry exceeded that of other U.S. workers between 1929 and 2008 ■ 2.3  
By which it does today ■ 3.6
- Portion of financial-services workers who say that they must “engage in unethical or illegal activity to be successful” ■ 1/5
- Percentage of black professional U.S. women who aspire to “a powerful position with a prestigious title” ■ 22  
Percentage of white professional women who do ■ 8
- Percentage change since 2002 in the birthrate among unmarried U.S. women aged 35 to 39 ■ +52  
Among unmarried U.S. teenagers ■ -32
- Percentage change in the past four decades in the size of the average American family ■ -10  
In the square footage of the average newly built American home ■ +60
- Percentage change since 1993 in the suicide rate among black U.S. children aged 5 to 11 ■ +87  
Among white U.S. children ■ -32
- Tuition cost of Icon Academy, a four-day summer camp devoted to “teaching teens how to monetize their talents” ■ \$3,000
- Percentage change since 2009 in the number of federal prison inmates aged 65 and older ■ +42  
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- Estimated average number of names added to the FBI’s criminal registry each day ■ 11,000
- Number of facial composites created with DNA from litter in Hong Kong for use in a local public-shaming campaign ■ 27  
Estimated number of government officials executed so far this year in North Korea ■ 15
- Estimated percentage change in the past year in the number of beheadings performed in Saudi Arabia ■ +267  
Number of executioner jobs advertised on Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Civil Service website in May ■ 8
- Factor by which polygamous Saudi and Emirati men are more likely than monogamous ones to suffer from heart disease ■ 4.6
- Percentage change since 2003 in the portion of Americans who say that polygamy is “morally acceptable” ■ +129  
Percentage change over the past three decades in the number of U.S. gyms and health clubs ■ +455  
In the U.S. obesity rate ■ +65
- Hours of television watched each day by the average U.S. kindergartner ■ 3.3
- Percentage by which a kindergartner who watches more than an hour a day is more likely to be obese ■ 73  
Last year in which Pope Francis watched television ■ 1990
- Percentage change since last year in the number of minority-produced network television shows ■ +3  
Percentage of this increase attributable to Tyler Perry ■ 100
- Percentage of white and black Americans, respectively, who said in March that race relations were “generally bad” ■ 35, 58  
In May ■ 62, 65
- Rate of homicides of black men in major U.S. urban areas ■ 52 per 100,000  
Of police officers in the same areas ■ 3 per 100,000
- Estimated portion of fatalities following police use of Tasers in which “excited delirium” is cited among the causes of death ■ 1/5
- Number of years since 2000 in which traffic accidents have been the leading cause of U.S. law-enforcement deaths ■ 12  
Percentage of all vehicle miles traveled in the United States that are traveled by motorcycles ■ 0.68  
Percentage of people who die in U.S. road accidents who are motorcyclists ■ 10
- Number of crashes involving Google’s self-driving cars that have occurred since testing began in 2009 ■ 13  
Percentage of those crashes attributable to human-driver error ■ 100
- Average annual number of traffic jams at Yellowstone National Park caused by drivers’ rubbernecking of bears ■ 840

*Figures cited are the latest available as of June 2015. Sources are listed on page 94.*

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27. 18<sup>th</sup> Century Reality and Decorative Rococo
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# READINGS

[Essay]

## THE TRANSHUMAN CONDITION

By John Markoff, from *Machines of Loving Grace*, out this month from Ecco Books. Markoff has been a technology and business reporter for the New York Times since 1988.

Bill Duvall grew up on the peninsula south of San Francisco. The son of a physicist who was involved in classified research at Stanford Research Institute (SRI), a military-oriented think tank, Duvall attended UC Berkeley in the mid-1960s; he took all the university's computer-programming courses and dropped out after two years. When he joined the think tank where his father worked, a few miles from the Stanford campus, he was assigned to the team of artificial-intelligence researchers who were building Shakey.

Although *Life* magazine would later dub Shakey the first "electronic person," it was basically a six-foot stack of gear, sensors, and motorized wheels that was tethered—and later wirelessly connected—to a nearby mainframe. Shakey wasn't the world's first mobile robot, but it was the first that was intended to be truly autonomous. It was designed to reason about the world around it, to plan its own actions, and to perform tasks. It could find and push objects and move in a planned way in its highly structured world.

At both SRI and the nearby Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (SAIL), which was founded by John McCarthy in 1962, a tightly knit group of researchers was attempting to build machines that mimicked human capabilities. To

this group, Shakey was a striking portent of the future; they believed that the scientific breakthrough that would enable machines to act like humans was coming in just a few short years. Indeed, among the small community of AI researchers who were working on both coasts during the mid-Sixties, there was virtually boundless optimism.

But the reality disappointed Duvall. Shakey lived in a large open room with linoleum floors and a couple of racks of electronics. Box-like objects were scattered around for the robot to "play" with. Shakey's sensors would capture its environment and then it would "think"—standing motionless for minutes on end—before moving. Even in its closed and controlled world, the robot frequently broke down or drained its batteries after just minutes of operation.

Down the hall from the Shakey laboratory, another research group, led by computer scientist Doug Engelbart, was building a computer to run a program called NLS—the oN-Line System. Most people who know of Engelbart today know him as the inventor of the mouse. But the mouse, to Engelbart, was simply a gadget to improve our ability to interact with computers. His more encompassing idea was to use computer technologies to make it possible for small groups of scientists, engineers, and educators to "bootstrap" their projects by employing an array of ever more powerful software tools to organize their activities and create a "collective I.Q." that outstripped the capabilities of any single individual. During World War II, Engelbart had stumbled across an article by Vannevar Bush that proposed a microfilm-based information-retrieval system called Memex to manage all of the world's knowledge. He realized that such a system could be assembled with computers.

The cultural gulf between McCarthy's artificial intelligence and Engelbart's contrarian NLS was



[Parameters]

## SQUARE SPACE

*From a May posting to a classifieds website for Stanford University students. The post sought roommates for Startup Castle, a 17,000-square-foot Tudor mansion in Woodside, California.*

**W**elcome, friends!

We're building a community of excellence in one of the most impressive estates in Silicon Valley. We believe that the right people in a place like this can make for a great environment and geometric scaling of success for everybody.

You must:

- have a top-class degree or job with a strong math/science requirement
- exercise at least fifteen hours in a normal week
- commute by car less than 20 percent of the time
- prefer organized systems and common rules

This may not be the right place if you:

- watch more than four hours of TV/movie/game entertainment per week
- have more than one tattoo
- have attended more than one protest
- make more than three posts a week to social media
- wear makeup more than twice a week
- own any clothing, shoes, watches, or handbags costing over \$500
- have more than one Internet-app date per week
- have a complex diet that requires lots of refrigerator space
- drink alcohol more than three drinks per week
- use marijuana more than twice a year
- have been prescribed anything by a psychiatrist more than once
- have used any other drug more than twice in your entire life

About the place: It's furnished, and we stock the "generosity kitchen" with basic foods. As we get the permanent group settled, we're hoping to do things as a group like fitness challenges, group dinners, bike rides, challenge outings, and working on building things together. Private rooms start at \$1,750, shared dormitory for \$1,000. More for private bathrooms, car parking, and extra people. Aside from being a cool place with great people, I really think this is the best deal in Silicon Valley, but let me know if you think I'm wrong.

already apparent to those on either side. When Engelbart visited MIT to demonstrate his project, prominent AI researcher Marvin Minsky complained that he was wasting research dollars on a glorified word processor. But the idea captivated Bill Duvall. Before long he switched his allegiance and moved down the hall to work in Engelbart's lab.

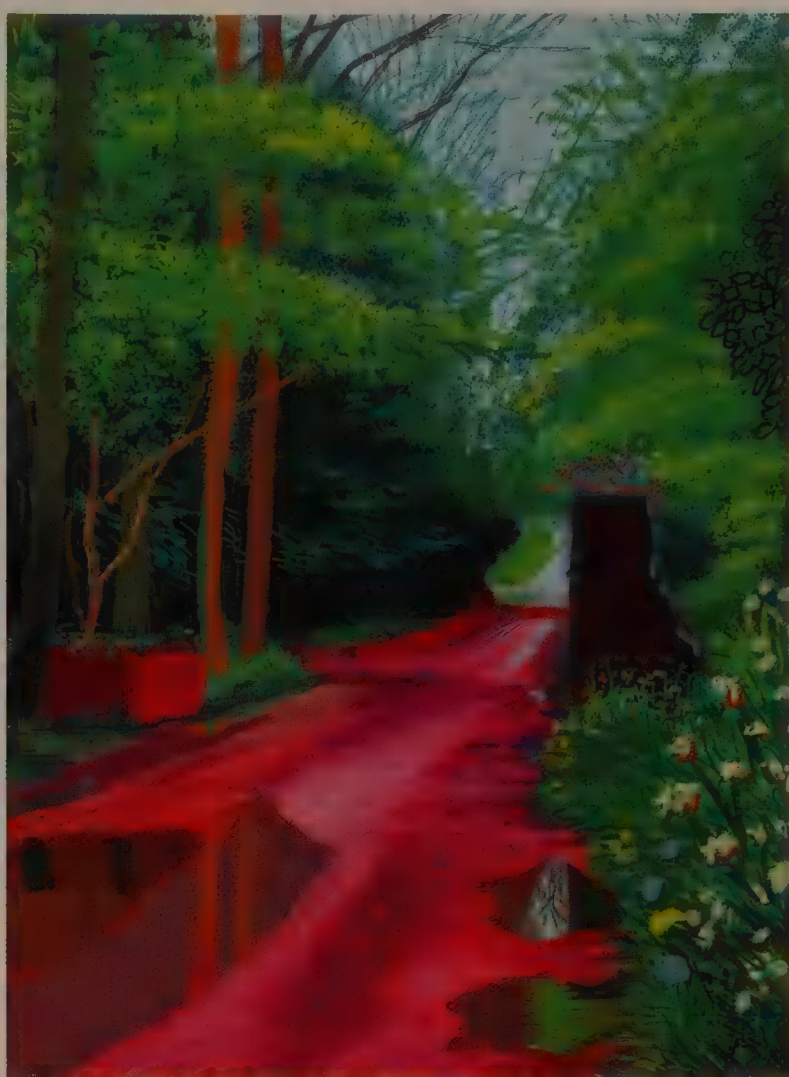
Late on the evening of October 29, 1969, Duvall connected the NLS system in Menlo Park, via a data line leased from the phone company, to a computer controlled by another young hacker in Los Angeles. It was the first time that two computers connected over the network that would become the Internet. Duvall's leap from the Shakey laboratory to Engelbart's NLS made him one of the earliest people to stand on both sides of a line that even today distinguishes two rival engineering communities. One of these communities has relentlessly pursued the automation of the human experience—artificial intelligence. The other, human-computer interaction—what Engelbart called intelligence augmentation—has concerned itself with "man-machine symbiosis." What separates AI and IA is partly their technical approaches, but the distinction also implies differing ethical stances toward the relationship of man to machine.

**D**uring the 1970s and 1980s the field of artificial intelligence drew a generation of brilliant engineers, but it often disappointed them in much the way that it had disappointed Duvall. Like him, many of these engineers turned to the contrasting ideal of intelligence augmentation. But today, AI is beginning to meet some of the promises made for it by SAIL and SRI researchers half a century ago, and artificial intelligence is poised to have an impact on society that may be greater than the effect of personal computing and the Internet.

Although their project has now largely been forgotten, the designers of Shakey pioneered computing technologies that are now used by more than a billion people. The mapping software in our cars and our smartphones is based on techniques the team first developed. Their A\* algorithm is the best-known way to find the shortest path between two locations. Toward the end of the Shakey project, speech control was added as a research task; Apple's Siri, whose name is a nod to SRI, is a distant descendent of the machine that began life as a stack of rolling sensors and actuators.

While Engelbart's original research led directly to the PC and the Internet, McCarthy's lab did not provide a single dramatic breakthrough. Rather, the falling costs of sensors, computer processing, and information storage, along with the gradual shift away from symbolic logic and toward more pragmatic statistical and





The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven)–5 May and The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven)–11 May, iPad drawings by David Hockney, whose work was on view in January at Pace Gallery in New York City.

machine-learning algorithms, have made it possible for engineers and programmers to create computerized systems that see, speak, listen, and move around in the world.

As a result, AI has been transformed from an academic curiosity into a force that is altering countless aspects of the modern world. This has created an increasingly clear choice for designers—a choice that has become philosophical and ethical, rather than simply technical: will we design humans into or out of the systems that transport us, that grow our food, manufacture our goods, and provide our entertainment?

As computing and robotics systems have grown from laboratory curiosities into the fabric that weaves together modern life, the AI and IA communities have continued to speak past each other. The field of human-computer interface has largely operated within the philosophical framework originally set down by Engelbart—that computers should be used to assist humans. In contrast, the artificial-intelligence community

has for the most part remained unconcerned with preserving a role for individual humans in the systems it creates.

Terry Winograd was one of the first to see the two extremes clearly and to consider their consequences. As a graduate student at MIT in the 1960s, Winograd studied human language in order to build a software robot that was capable of interacting with humans in conversation. During the 1980s, he was part of a small group of AI researchers who engaged in seminars at Berkeley with the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and John Searle. The philosophers persuaded Winograd that there were real limits to the capabilities of intelligent machines. In part because of his changing views, he left the field of artificial intelligence.

A decade later, as the faculty adviser for Google cofounder Larry Page, Winograd counseled the young graduate student to focus on Web search rather than more far-fetched technologies. Page's original PageRank algorithm, the heart of Google's search engine, can perhaps be seen as the most powerful example of human augmentation in



history. The algorithm systematically collected human decisions about the value of information and pooled those decisions to prioritize search results. Although some criticized the process for siphoning intellectual labor from vast numbers of unwitting humans, the algorithm established an unstated social contract: Google mined the wealth of human knowledge and returned it in searchable form to society, while reserving for itself the right to monetize the results.

Since it established its search box as the world's most powerful information monopoly, Google has yo-yoed between IA and AI applications and services. The ill-fated Google Glass was intended as a "reality-augmentation system," while the company's driverless-car project represents a pure AI—replacing human agency and intelligence with a machine. Recently, Google has undertaken what it loosely identifies as "brain" projects, which suggests a new wave of AI.

In 2012, Google researchers presented a paper on a machine-vision system. After training itself on 10 million digital images taken from YouTube videos, the system dramatically outperformed previous efforts at an automated-vision network, roughly doubling their accuracy in recognizing objects from a list of 20,000 distinct items. Among other things, the system taught itself to recognize cats—perhaps not surprising, given the overabundance of cat videos on YouTube—with a mechanism that the scientists described as a cybernetic cousin to what takes place in the brain's visual cortex. The experiment was made possible by Google's immense computing resources, which allowed researchers to turn loose a cluster of 16,000 processors on the problem—though that number still, of course, represented a tiny fraction of the billions of neurons in a human brain, a huge portion of which are devoted to vision.

**S**peculation about whether Google is on the trail of a genuine artificial brain has become increasingly rampant. There is certainly no question that a growing group of Silicon Valley engineers and scientists believe themselves to be closing in on "strong" AI—the creation of a self-aware machine with human or greater intelligence.

Whether or not this goal is ever achieved, it is becoming increasingly possible—and "rational"—to design humans out of systems for both performance and cost reasons. In manufacturing, where robots can directly replace human labor, the impact of artificial intelligence will be easily visible. In other cases the direct effects will be more difficult to discern. Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." Today our computational systems have become immense edifices that define the way we interact with our society.

In Silicon Valley it is fashionable to celebrate this development, a trend that is most clearly visible in organizations like the Singularity Institute and in books like Kevin Kelly's *What Technology Wants* (2010). In an earlier book, *Out of Control* (1994), Kelly came down firmly on the side of the machines:

The problem with our robots today is that we don't respect them. They are stuck in factories without windows, doing jobs that humans don't want to do. We take machines as slaves, but they are not that. That's what Marvin Minsky, the mathematician who pioneered artificial intelligence, tells anyone who will listen. Minsky goes all the way as an advocate for downloading human intelligence into a computer. Doug Engelbart, on the other hand, is the legendary guy who invented word processing, the mouse, and hypermedia, and who is an advocate for computers-for-the-people. When the two gurus met at MIT in the 1950s, they are reputed to have had the following conversation:

MINSKY: We're going to make machines intelligent. We are going to make them conscious!

ENGELBART: You're going to do all that for the machines? What are you going to do for the people?

This story is usually told by engineers working to make computers more friendly, more humane, more people centered. But I'm squarely on Minsky's side—on the side of the made. People will survive. We'll train our machines to serve us. But what are we going to do for the machines?

But to say that people will "survive" understates the possible consequences: Minsky is said to have responded to a question about the significance of the arrival of artificial intelligence by saying, "If we're lucky, they'll keep us as pets."

Until recently, the artificial-intelligence community has largely chosen to ignore the ethics of systems that they consider merely powerful tools. When I asked one engineer who is building next-generation robots about the impact of automation on people, he told me, "You can't think about that; you just have to decide that you are going to do the best you can to improve the world for humanity as a whole."

AI and machine-learning algorithms have already led to transformative applications in areas as diverse as science, manufacturing, and entertainment. Machine vision and pattern recognition have been essential to improving quality in semiconductor design. Drug-discovery algorithms have systematized the creation of new pharmaceuticals. The same breakthroughs have also brought us increased government surveillance and social-media companies whose business model depends on invading privacy for profit.



Optimists hope that the potential abuses of our computer systems will be minimized if the application of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and robotics remains focused on humans rather than algorithms. But the tech industry has not had a track record that speaks to moral enlightenment. It would be truly remarkable if a Silicon Valley company rejected a profitable technology for ethical reasons. Today, decisions about implementing technology are made largely on the basis of profitability and efficiency. What is needed is a new moral calculus.

[Anecdotal Evidence]

## LAB RATS

*From recent posts made to STEMfeminist.com, a forum that collects accounts of discrimination and harassment against women studying or working in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics.*

I am a postdoc in a field that requires occasional soldering and minor circuitry. For my Ph.D. I created all my electronic equipment, and have over seven years experience doing so. Despite this, each time there is a project that requires soldering, my adviser says to wait until [male colleague] is in, since "he knows what he is doing." Lately I have stopped asking, but when I tell my adviser I've finished the project, he always has to come "check it," then acts surprised when it works.

When I was a new assistant professor, I went to a meeting for researchers in my field. I gave my talk, which was well received, with many questions leading to discussions then and afterward. Later, I encountered one of the well-known male professors, who told me my talk was very nice and patted me on the head.

Each year, as new (often female) trainees enter our psychology program, I notice that they all address female faculty by their first names and male faculty by their formal titles. I have had trainees address me by my first name, then immediately address a male colleague by his formal title in the same sentence ("Hello X and Dr. Y").

When I was an undergraduate math student I scheduled a meeting with my department chair to talk about which Ph.D. programs to apply to. His response was that the most important thing for me to focus on over the next few years was "finding a life partner." He said that given my scores and

[Concerns]

## CHARLES IN CHARGE

*From letters written by Prince Charles to British officials between 2004 and 2009. The letters, known as the "black-spider memos" because of the prince's handwriting, were released in May, after the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom overruled the government's attempts to deny a request made by the Guardian under the Freedom of Information Act in 2005.*

**D**ear Prime Minister,

It was very good to see you again the other day and, as usual, I much enjoyed the opportunity to talk about a number of issues. You kindly suggested that it would be helpful if I put them in writing—despite the Freedom of Information Act!

We discussed at some length the agricultural situation. The most pressing and urgent problem is, without doubt, the rising numbers of TB cases in cattle. As you know, all the evidence is that TB is caused and spread by badgers. I urge you to look again at introducing a proper cull of badgers where it is necessary. I, for one, cannot understand how the "badger lobby" seem to mind not at all about the slaughter of thousands of expensive cattle, and yet object to a managed cull of an overpopulation of badgers—to me, this is intellectually dishonest.

We also briefly mentioned the European Union Directive on Herbal Medicines, which is having such a deleterious effect on the complementary-medicine sector in this country by effectively outlawing the use of certain herbal extracts. I think we both agreed this was using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Dear Mr. Morley,

Thank you so much for your letter telling me about the High Seas Task Force. I must say that it is enormously encouraging to know of your efforts to bring to heel the recalcitrant countries who sanction pirate and illegal fishing, and I do wish you well in your endeavours. I particularly hope that the illegal fishing of the Patagonian toothfish will be high on your list of priorities, because until that trade is stopped, there is little hope for the poor old albatross, for which I shall continue to campaign.... Let us hope that between all of us who mind about sustainable fishing, we can make a difference before it is all too late....

Yours ever,  
Charles



his estimations of my ability, I should consider a particular tiny, unheard-of program. Then he said actually I had better not apply to that program, because it was rural and small and there would be “three Asian men to choose from.”

As a new assistant professor, I was asked to join a multidepartmental collaborative working group preparing a grant. At the initial meeting, when the participants were milling about greeting each other, I heard a researcher comment to the colleague with whom I had walked in, “What a great idea it was to bring your secretary! Now we’ll all have accurate meeting notes!”

I was recently invited to give a talk at a university. During one of the off moments, the main host mentioned that he didn’t believe sexism existed at his institution. As proof, he pointed out that he had just hired a female postdoc. When I asked how many other female postdocs his department had, he said, “Well, she’s the only one.”

One day, in front of the entire class, my favorite geology professor told me that it was okay for me to get my bachelor’s degree in geology, but after that I needed to stay home and bake cookies for the real geologists.

As an undergraduate physics student, whenever I had the highest test score in the class the running joke was that I had slept with the professor the night before. They would sometimes draw pictures of me performing oral sex on the professor on the whiteboard in the physics lounge.

When I was trying to decide which grad school to attend, I was invited to visit a department at an Ivy League university. During the visit, I interviewed with a male faculty member whose research was related to what I was hoping to study. He spent five minutes talking with me about the work in his lab, then called me over to sit next to him at his desk. He had a browser window open and was looking at a series of photo composites of young women who were supposed to represent “average” faces of women from various countries. He finally decided that Ethiopian women were the most attractive to him.

I worked as an undergraduate R.A. for 1.5 years in a male professor’s lab. After graduating—knowing I was planning to apply to graduate school—I did my best to stay in contact with the professor in a professional yet friendly manner. Shortly before applications were due, I asked if he would like to get coffee or lunch to discuss my application, as he had agreed to write me a letter of recommendation. He instead suggested dinner at a bar/restaurant near his home. He insisted on buying me drinks, and continued to order several rounds throughout

the evening. During dinner, he commented on my appearance multiple times. Afterward, I thanked him and said I would be walking to the subway station. He told me that the subway was closed and that I should sleep on his couch. I knew the subway wasn’t closed and suggested I try to catch a train or a cab, but he insisted. Reluctantly, I went back to his home, where he raped me. One week later, he sent me several sealed copies and one unsealed copy of a glowing letter of recommendation.

[Journey]

## THE STORY OF A NEW NAME

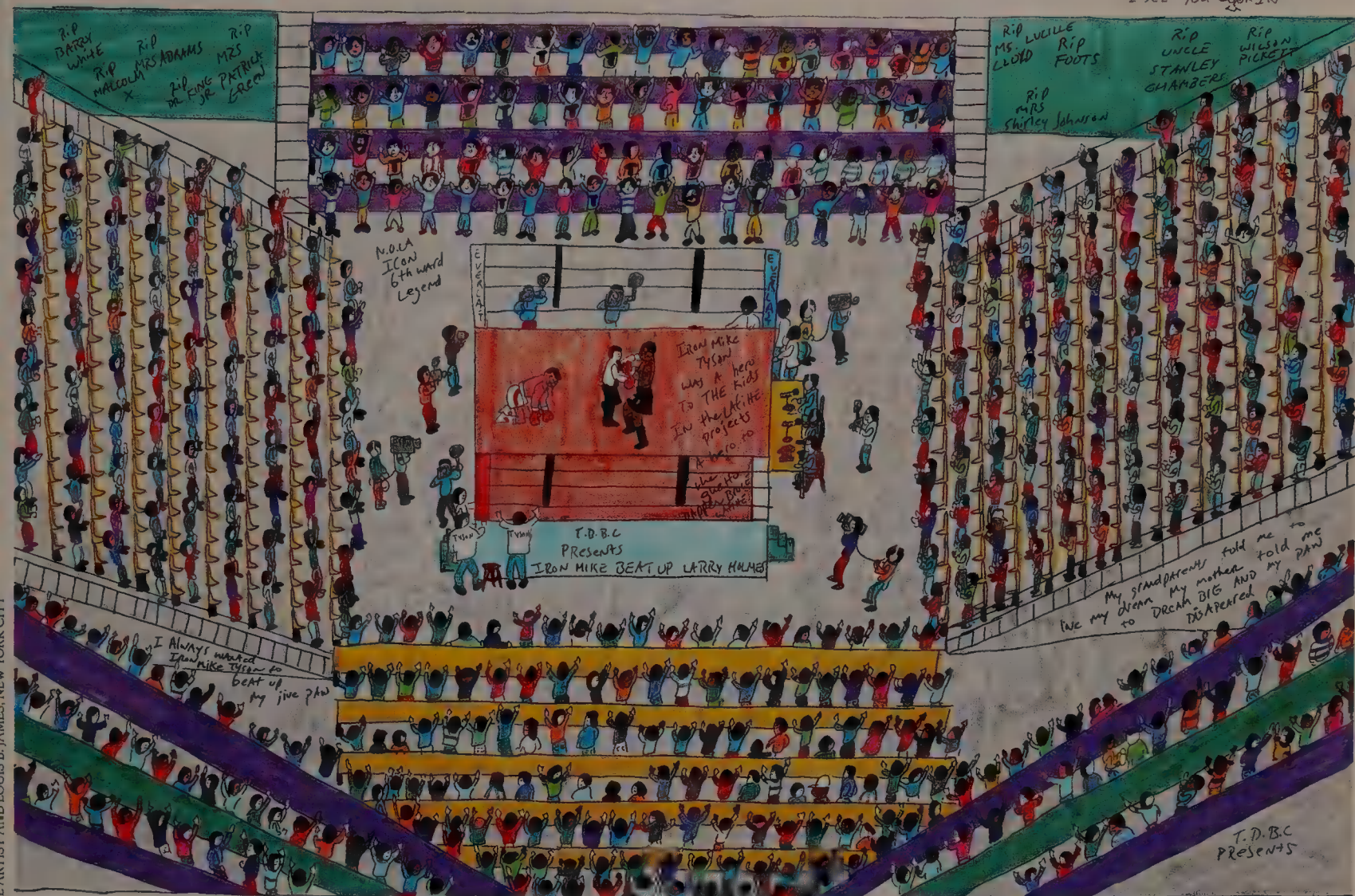
By Anna Badkhen, from *Walking with Abel: Journeys with the Nomads of the African Savannah*, out this month from Riverhead Books. Badkhen is the author of several previous books, including *The World Is a Carpet: Four Seasons in an Afghan Village*.

To join the nomads I needed an introduction, and I went looking in the unpaved bezel of Djenné’s market square, in the shadow of the Grande Mosquée’s soaring clay minarets. It was Sunday; the Africa Cup of Nations blared from television sets propped on crates outside the shops. South Africa was playing Morocco. Halftime news delivered dispatches of death from the north of Mali, where a latter-day jihad was converting traditional nomadic routes into battle lines. Al Qaeda was chopping off hands in Gao and blowing up old Islamic shrines in Timbuktu. French troops had arrived in Mali a week earlier and now rumbled into the Sahara in armored personnel vehicles. Half a century after their country had gained independence from France, Malians gathered by the side of the road to wave at the soldiers.

Afo Bocoum sat under the thatched awning of a shabby mercantile on a long backless wooden bench. Afo’s father had forsaken a nomadic life to serve as a translator for French colonists, and Afo had grown up in Djenné. To satisfy his nomadic yearnings he rode his motorcycle twice daily to the pastures where hired cowboys herded his many hundreds of cows. He would lean the bike against a tree, talk to his cattle, and feed them cottonseed by hand.

Afo was a *diawando*, a member of a Fulani caste of mediators who settled disputes among the nomads. The Fulani despised and feared government in all its incomprehensible forms, and they hated the bureaucracy, which considered the nomads arrogant, rich, and obsolete, and





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T.D.B.C. Presents Iron Mike Beat Up Larry Holmes, a drawing by Dapper Bruce Lafitte (formerly known as Bruce Davenport Jr.), whose work is on view this month at Arthur Roger Gallery, in New Orleans.

took advantage of their illiteracy by fleecing them recklessly. *Diawandos* advised their clients on matters legal, formal, veterinary, and financial. The relationship was passed down from father to son, and the loyalty between the *diawandos* and the pastoralists was nonpareil.

Afo picked at his teeth with a match and considered my request to join the Fulani on their trek. At last he announced: "We'll go to the bush tomorrow."

On the other end of the square, two elders stopped me. Babourou Koïta, a *diawando* like Afo, held court each day in a chair made of bamboo and goatskin, while in the secrecy of his compound, cowboys in his employ raised gigantic crossbreeds of zebus and Holsteins. Next to Babourou, in an identical chair sat his best friend, Ali the Griot.

Griots dumbfounded the fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battuta. "Each one of them has got inside a costume made of feathers to look like a

thrush with a wooden head made for it and a red beak as if it were the head of a bird. They stand before the sultan in that ridiculous attire and recite their poetry," he wrote in the chronicle of his journey through the Malian kingdom. "It was mentioned to me that their poetry is a kind of preaching."

Modern griots no longer dress in feathers. They are court jesters in a world without kings. Some cut records and perform in front of African, European, and American crowds. Most dispense wisdom at weddings, at political rallies, and in public squares. Ali was one of those.

Ali had a two-pack-a-day habit, and he looked like my grandfather, who had died when I was a girl. I told him that. He nodded and informed me that he was broke. "That makes two of us," I said. He laughed and nodded again. I told him that my grandfather had been an orchestra conductor, an entertainer, and that my grandfather's name—my



name, Badkhen—meant “fiddler,” an irreverent jester-rhymer who ad-libbed at Jewish weddings. I came from a long line of Yiddish griots, I said. Ali stubbed out a Dunhill in the dust, motioned to Babourou for another, and told me that to walk in the Sahel I needed a different name, a Fulani name. He looked at Babourou. Babourou looked at the sky, presumably for instruction.

“Bâ!” he said. “Your name will be Anna Bâ.”

Ali nodded once more. “Good name. Noble name. One of the oldest Fulani names.” He grabbed my hand and yanked it up in the air and sang me my new ancient family history. It began in no remembered time with the arrival of four Fulani progenitor families—the Diallos, the spiritual leaders; the Sows, the logisticians; the Bâs, the largest cattle owners; and the Barris, their helpers—from a faraway desert. It ended like this: “Anna Bâ, Bâ the owner of cattle, Bâ the owner of white cattle, white is the color of milk, Bâ the owner of the color white. First came the Diallos, the Sows, the Bâs, the Barris. Bâ is the owner of many animals, Bâ is the owner of butter, Bâ smells of butter, Bâ the sweetest-smelling Fulani. Bâ. Bâ. Bâ. Bâ.”

We held an official naming ceremony the next day at a bar on the outskirts of town. Inside, a small television set was tuned to a channel that showed dancers in bikinis and hot pants grinding to hip-hop. The bar’s owner was a settled Fulani who spoke seven or eight languages and went by the nickname Pygmée. “*Peul moderne*,” Afo called him: the modern Fulani. Out of respect for the Muslim sensibilities of my elder guests, Pygmée turned off the television. His friend Allaye the Butcher had roasted a goat in town and delivered it to the bar that evening.

My three godfathers arrived on motorcycles, wearing robes. Afo wore a white boubou and had two helpings of goat, which he pronounced very good. Babourou, in a handwoven mantle of black and turquoise wool embroidered with gold thread, told me that to be a hundred percent Fulani I needed a Fulani man, and that he and the other elders would assist me in any manner possible. Ali the Griot promised that my new name would protect me from evil.

“Anna Bâ! Fulani Bâ! Général de Gaulle! *Bienvenue, bienvenue*.” We toasted with orange Fanta.

I walked up to the flat roof and watched the white guinea fowl that was perched in a nearby eucalyptus grove. In a thin web of orange streetlights Djenné’s oblique adobes crowded narrow, asymmetrical, and surreal. The floodplains around the town reflected the blue and crimson of the dying sky. The town seemed suspended in air. Beyond spread the thorny and flat Sahelian wilderness that belonged to the cows and their cowboys. I would be joining them in the morning.

[Fiction]

## MEASURE FOR MEASURE

From *Eileen*, by Ottessa Moshfegh, out this month from Penguin Press. Moshfegh’s first novel, *McGlue* (Fence Books), was awarded the Fence Modern Prize in Prose in 2014.

I remember the shower I took that morning because the hot water ran out while I dillydallied at the mirror inspecting my naked body through the wafting steam. I’m an old lady now. Like it does to everyone, time has blurred my face with lines and sagging jowls and bulging bags under my eyes, and my old body’s been rendered sexless and soft and wrinkled and shapeless. So just for laughs, here I am again, my little virginal body at age twenty-four. My shoulders were small and sloped and knobbly. My chest was rigid, a taut drum of bones that I thudded with my fist like an ape. My breasts were lemon-size and hard and my nipples were sharp, like thorns. But I was really just all ribs, and so thin that my hips jutted out awkwardly and were often bruised from bumping into things. My gut was still distended from the ice cream and eggs I ate the day before. The sluggishness of my bowels was a constant preoccupation. There was a complex science to eating and evacuating, balancing the rising intensity of my constipated discomfort with the catharsis of my laxative-induced purges. I took such poor care of myself. I knew I should drink water, eat healthful foods, but I didn’t like to drink water or eat healthful foods. I found fruits and vegetables detestable, like eating a bar of soap or a candle. I also suffered from that unfortunate maladjustment to puberty—still at twenty-four—that made me ashamed of my womanliness. There were days on end that I ate very little—a handful of nuts or raisins here, a crust of bread there. And for fun, such as with the chocolates a few nights prior, I sometimes chewed but spat out candies or cookies, anything that tasted good but which I feared might put meat on my bones.

Back then, at twenty-four, people already considered me a spinster. I’d had only one kiss from a boy. When I was sixteen, Peter Woodman, a senior, took me to the high-school prom. I won’t say too much about him—I don’t want to sound as though I’ve carried the memory around with any romantic nostalgia. If there’s anything I’ve learned to detest, it is nostalgia. My prom dress was very pretty, though—navy taffeta. I loved navy blue. Whatever I wore in that color reminded me of a uniform, something that I felt validated me and obscured me at once. We spent most of our time sitting at a table in the darkened gymnasium, Peter talking to



his friends. His father worked in the police station and I'm sure that Peter only asked me to the prom as a favor his father owed to mine. We didn't dance, not that I minded. The evening of the prom ended in Peter's father's pickup truck in the high-school parking lot when I bit the boy's throat to keep him from reaching any farther up my dress. In fact, I think his hand was barely on my knee, I was so guarded. And the kiss was only superficial—a momentary touching of the lips, sort of sweet when I think of it now. I can't remember how I got home that night after tumbling out of the truck, Peter heckling me and rubbing his neck as I watched him drive away. Did my teeth draw blood? I don't know. And who cares anyway? By now he's probably dead. Most people I knew are dead.

That Monday morning in X-ville, I put on my new blue stockings and dressed in my mother's clothes and drove to work, to Moorehead. I remember conjuring up a new strategy for my getaway. One day soon, when I was good and ready, I'd pile on all the clothes I had decided on taking with me: my gray coat, several pairs of wool socks, snow boots, mittens, gloves, hat, scarf, pants, skirt, dress, et cetera, and I'd drive about three hours northwest across state lines to Vermont. New York wasn't that far from X-ville. Two hundred fifty-seven miles south, to be exact. But first I'd lead any search astray by abandoning the Dodge in Rutland, which I'd read about in a book about railroads. In Rutland I'd find some kind of abandoned lot or dead-end street, and then I'd walk to the railway station and take a train down to the city to start my new life. I thought I was so smart. I planned to bring along an empty suitcase to carry the clothes I'd take off once I got on the train. I'd have some clothes, the money I'd been hoarding in the attic, and nothing else.

But maybe I'd need something to read on my ride to my future, I thought. I could borrow a few of the finer books from the X-ville library, disappear, and never return them. This seemed to me a brilliant idea. First, I would get to keep the books as mementos, a bit like when a killer snips a lock of hair from his victim or takes some small object—a pen, a comb, a rosary—as his trophy. Second, I'd give good cause for concern to my father and others who might wonder whether I intended ever to return or under what circumstances I was forced to leave. I pictured detectives poking around the house. "Nothing seems to be out of order, Mr. Dunlop. Maybe she's visiting a friend."

"Oh no, not Eileen. Eileen has no friends," my father would say. "Something's happened. She'd never leave me alone like this."

My hope was that they'd think I was dead in a ditch somewhere, kidnapped, buried in an avalanche, eaten by a bear, what have you. It was important to me that nobody know I planned to disappear. If my father thought I'd run away, he would have humiliated me. I could imagine him

puffing out his chest and scoffing at my foolishness with Aunt Ruth. They'd call me a spoiled brat, an idiot, an ungrateful rat's ass. Perhaps they did say all that once I really left X-ville. I'll never know. I wanted my father to despair, cry his eyes out over

[Ethology]

## DOCTORAL FECES

From "Natural Waste: Canine Companions and the Lure of Inattentively Pooping in Public," a study by Matthias Gross, published in the March 2015 issue of *Environmental Sociology*.

At first glance, dog walking seems straightforward. Walk the dog, let it poop, walk the dog home. But why is it that the poop falling out of the dog is not taken care of, and if it is, how exactly is this done? Around 2003, I started observing dog walkers and taking notes about their relations to dog excrement. (I often did this when I walked one of my three kids to nearby parks. At the time I decided to write a paper on it, I had been observing dog walkers for some ten years in Germany and abroad.) My attempts to ask dog walkers about their habit were often met with aggression ("Mind your own business," "Don't you have anything else to do with your time?"). When I asked dog owners why they let their dogs poop here and not somewhere else, a sentiment I often heard was, "When my dog has to poop, it has to poop." At one point, a dog owner countered: "You have to realize, you are not alone on this planet. Animals have rights, too."

When a dog owner uses a bag to dispose of their dog's poop, he or she often seems to take good care that somebody else is watching. In turn, the owner will sometimes pretend that he or she has not seen the dog pooping—for example, by talking earnestly into a cell phone or using an iPad. If the dog has runny poop, skillful dog owners, I observed, reacted quickly, and the bag in their hands deliberately went back into their pockets.

Poop on the sidewalk or anywhere else in public serves as a visual and olfactory (and, if stepped on, a tactile) conduit of communication. It can be seen as a boundary between civilization and wilderness on behalf of the dog owner. Dogs become mediators for humans between wild nature and tamed culture. Perhaps it is the freedom taken away from humans to poop in nature that encourages them to project this freedom onto their best friends.



his poor lost daughter, collapse at the foot of my cot, swathe himself in my smelly blankets just to remember the beautiful stink of my sweat. I wanted him to paw through my belongings like he was examining bleached bones, inert artifacts of a life he'd never appreciated. If I'd ever had a music box, I'd have liked the song it played to break my father's heart. I'd have liked him to die of sadness at having lost me. "I loved her," I wanted him to say. "And I was wrong to have acted like I didn't."

Such were my thoughts on my way to the prison that morning.

Around two o'clock, the warden came into our office followed by a tall redheaded woman and a willowy bald man in a loose, mud-colored suit. My first impression of the woman was that she must be a performer at the special assembly—a singer or an actress with a soft spot for child criminals. My assumption seemed reasonable. Celebrities entertained army troops, after all. Why not young prisoners? Teenage boys were a worthy enough cause. Most of those boys, the ones serving shorter sentences, ended up in Vietnam anyway, I'm sure. In any case, this woman was beautiful and looked vaguely familiar in the way all beautiful people look familiar. So within thirty seconds I'd decided that she must be an idiot, have a brain like a powder puff, be bereft of any depth or darkness, have no interior life whatever. Like Doris Day, this woman must live in a charmed world of fluffy pillows and golden sunshine. So of course I hated her. I'd never come face-to-face with someone so beautiful before in my life.

The man was not interesting to me in the least. He sniffled, rubbed his head with one hand, carried two coats over his other arm—his and the redhead's, I presumed. I couldn't help but stare at the woman. I have a dreamy picture in my memory of how she was dressed that day, in peculiar shades of pink, not unfashionable per se but not in the fashion of the times and certainly not of X-ville. She wore a long, flowing skirt, a sweater set draped around her slim figure, and a stiff-rimmed hat, which I picture now as something like a riding helmet, only it was gray and delicate, felt maybe, and held an iridescent feather on one side. Perhaps I've invented the hat. She wore a long gold pendant necklace—that I know for sure. Her shoes were like men's riding boots, only smaller, and with a delicate heel. Her legs were very long and her arms were thin and folded across her narrow rib cage. I was surprised to see a cigarette in her fingers. Many women smoked, of course, more than do now, but it seemed odd for her to smoke just standing there in the office as though she were at a cocktail party, as though she owned the place. And the way she smoked disturbed me. When others smoked, it was something needy and cheap. When this woman inhaled, her face trembled and

her eyes fluttered in subtle ecstasy, as though she were tasting a delectable dessert or stepping into a warm bath. She seemed to be in a state of enchantment, perfectly happy. And so she struck me as perverse. "Pretentious" wasn't a word we used back then. "Obnoxious" was more like it.

"Listen up," said the warden. He had a wide, red, and pitted face with a huge nose and small, inscrutable eyes, but he was so well groomed, so clean and militant, that I thought of him as handsome. "I present to you our new psychiatrist, Dr. Bradley Morris. He comes highly recommended by Dr. Frye, and I'm sure he'll be an asset to us in keeping our boys in line and on the path to redemption. And this is Miss Rebecca Saint John, our first ever prison director of education, thanks to a generous donation from Uncle Sam. I'm sure she's completely qualified. I understand she's just finished her graduate work at Radcliffe—"

"Harvard," said this Rebecca Saint John, leaning toward him slightly. She tipped her cigarette ash on the floor, blew the smoke at the ceiling, and seemed to grin. It was truly bizarre.

"Harvard," the warden continued, titillated, it seemed to me. "I know you will all welcome our new additions with respect and professionalism, and I hope you'll show Miss Saint John around in her first few days as she learns our customs here." He gestured to the office ladies, me included. It all seemed very strange, such a young, attractive woman appearing out of nowhere, and to do what? Teaching writing and arithmetic seemed like a ridiculous objective. Those Moorehead boys struggled just to walk around, sit down, eat, and breathe without beating their heads against the walls. Dr. Morris was there, for all intents and purposes, to drug them into acting right. What could they possibly be taught in their condition? The warden took Miss Saint John's coat from Dr. Morris's arm, handed it to me, and seemed to smile. I could never tell his real feelings toward me, sweater-vest or not. His death mask was thick as concrete, I suppose. In any case, it was my job to assign the new woman a locker. So she followed me back to the locker room.

Rebecca Saint John's face that day had no make-up on it that I could detect, and yet she looked impeccable, fresh-faced, a natural beauty. Her hair was long and thick, the color of brass, coarse, and, I noted gratefully, in need of a hearty brushing. Her skin was sort of golden colored, and her face was round and full with strong cheekbones, a rosebud mouth, thin eyebrows, and unusually blond eyelashes. Her eyes were an odd shade of blue. There was something manufactured about that color. It was a shade of blue like a swimming pool in an ad for a tropical getaway. It was the color of mouthwash, toothpaste, toilet cleaner. My own eyes, I thought, were like shallow lake water, green, murky, full of slime and sand. Needless to say, I felt completely insulted and horrible about myself in the





*"Assimilation 07," a photograph by Dillon Marsh, whose work was on view in February at Brundyn+, in Cape Town.*

presence of this beautiful woman. Perhaps I should have honored my resentment and kept my distance, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be close to her, to get an intimate view of her features, how she breathed, what her face did when her mind was busy thinking. I hoped to be able to spot her superficial imperfections, or at least find flaws in her character that could cancel out the good marks she got in the looks category. You see how silly I was? I wrote out the combination to her locker on a slip of paper and took a whiff of her when I handed it over. She smelled like baby powder. She wore no ring. I wondered if she had a boyfriend.

"Now let me have you stand here and watch me and let's see if I can figure out this lock," she said. She had a haughty, precisely articulated accent, the kind of accent you hear in old movies set in the south of France or fancy Manhattan hotels. Continental? I'd never heard anyone in real life talk like that. It seemed absurd in such a place as Moore-

head. Imagine the well-mannered tone of a British noblewoman politely bossing around her maid. I stood with my back against a column of lockers as she spun the dial of the combination lock.

"Thirty-two, twenty-four, thirty-four," she said. "Well, look at that, practically my measurements." She laughed and pulled the locker door open with a clang. My own measurements were even smaller. We both paused, and, as though we were each other's synchronized reflections, looked down at our own breasts, then at each other's. Rebecca said, "I prefer being sort of flat-chested, don't you? Women with big bosoms are always so bashful. That, or else they think their figures are all that matters. Pathetic." I thought of my sister, her body so conspicuous in its fleshiness, a main attraction. I must have made a face or blushed because Rebecca asked, "Oh, have I embarrassed you?" Her sincerity seemed genuine to me. We exchanged smiles. "Busts," she said, shrugging and looking down



again at her small breasts. "Who cares?" She laughed, winked at me, and turned back to her locker to fiddle with the dial.

Perhaps only young women of my same conniving and tragic nature will understand that there could be something in such an exchange as mine

with Rebecca that day that could unite two people in conspiracy. After years of secrecy and shame, in this one moment with her, all my frustrations were condoned, and my body, my very being, was justified. Such solidarity and awe I felt, you'd think I'd never had a friend before. And really, I hadn't. All

I'd had was Suzie or Alice or Maribel, figments, of course, imaginary girls I'd used in lies to my father—my own dark ghosts. "Of course I'm not embarrassed," I told her. To declare this took more courage than I'd needed in years, for it required the brief removal of my mask of ice. "I completely agree with you." What is that old saying? A friend is someone who helps you hide the body—that was the gist of this new rapport. I sensed it immediately. My life was going to change. In this strange creature, I'd met my match, my kindred spirit, my ally. Already I wanted to extend my hand, slashed and ready to be shaken in a pact of blood, that was how impressionable and lonely I was. I kept my hands in my pockets, however.

"Well, good," said Rebecca. "We have better things to do than worry about our figures. Though that's not the popular opinion, wouldn't you say?" She raised her eyebrows at me. She was really remarkably beautiful, so beautiful I had to avert my eyes. I wanted desperately to impress her, to elicit some clear indication from her that she felt as I did—that we were two peas in a pod.

"I don't care much about what's popular," I lied. I hadn't ever been so brash before. Oh, I was a rebel.

"Well, look at you," said Rebecca. She crossed her arms. "Rare to meet a young woman with so much gumption. You're a regular Katharine Hepburn." The comparison would have sounded like mockery if made by anyone else. But I wasn't offended. I laughed, blushed. Rebecca laughed too, then shook her head. "I'm kidding," she said. "I'm like that, too. I don't give a rat's ass what people think. But it is good if they think well of you. That has its advantages." We looked at each other and smiled, nodding sarcastically with widened eyes. Were we serious? It didn't seem to matter. It was like all my secret misery had just then been converted into a powerful currency. I'm sure Rebecca saw right through my bravado, but I didn't know that. I thought I was so smooth.

"See you around," I said. I figured it was best not to come on too strong. We waved to each other and Rebecca flew off back through the office and up the hall like some exotic bird or flower, utterly misplaced in the dim fluorescent light. I walked mechanically, heel-toe, back to my desk, hands clasped behind my back, whistling nothing in particular, my world transformed.

[Poem]

## THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

By Jeff Dolven, from *A New English Grammar*, a collection in progress. Dolven, who received a 2015 Guggenheim Fellowship, is the author of *Speculative Music*, published by Sarabande in 2013.

The custom of the country is to twist  
a length of plain white thread from the wooden spool  
set on each table;  
to make a simple net, a sketch of a harp,  
strung taut between the thumb and the first two fingers;

to catch up, next, into the air a portion,  
suspended above the plate, and then by a quick  
slacking of tension  
to make of it a simple gift to the mouth.  
Properly done, the fingers need never touch.

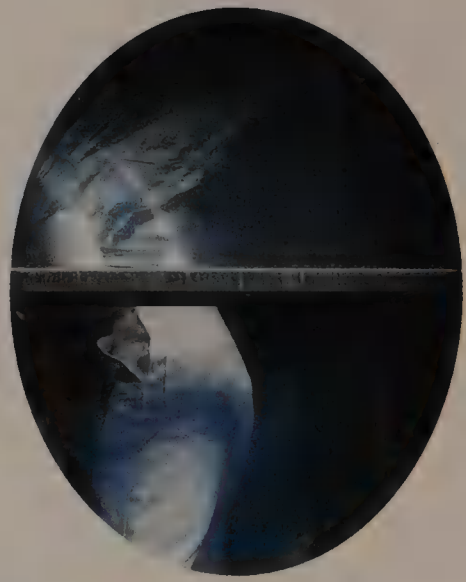
They are about the meal like seamstresses.  
Two hands, cat's cradle-wise, may painlessly  
pare a red apple;  
a loose strand may be trailed through a dish of spice,  
and then across a still and civil lip.

And all in silence, save for the scissor-whistle  
of the threads as they cross, recross, and never knot,  
rising and dipping,  
composing a sweet aeolian oversong  
that is at meals the only conversation.

By this the natives keep a cardinal tenet  
that the major functions of life be held apart  
each from the other,  
that the mouth, for example, when taking nourishment,  
be reserved from the sibling art of making talk.

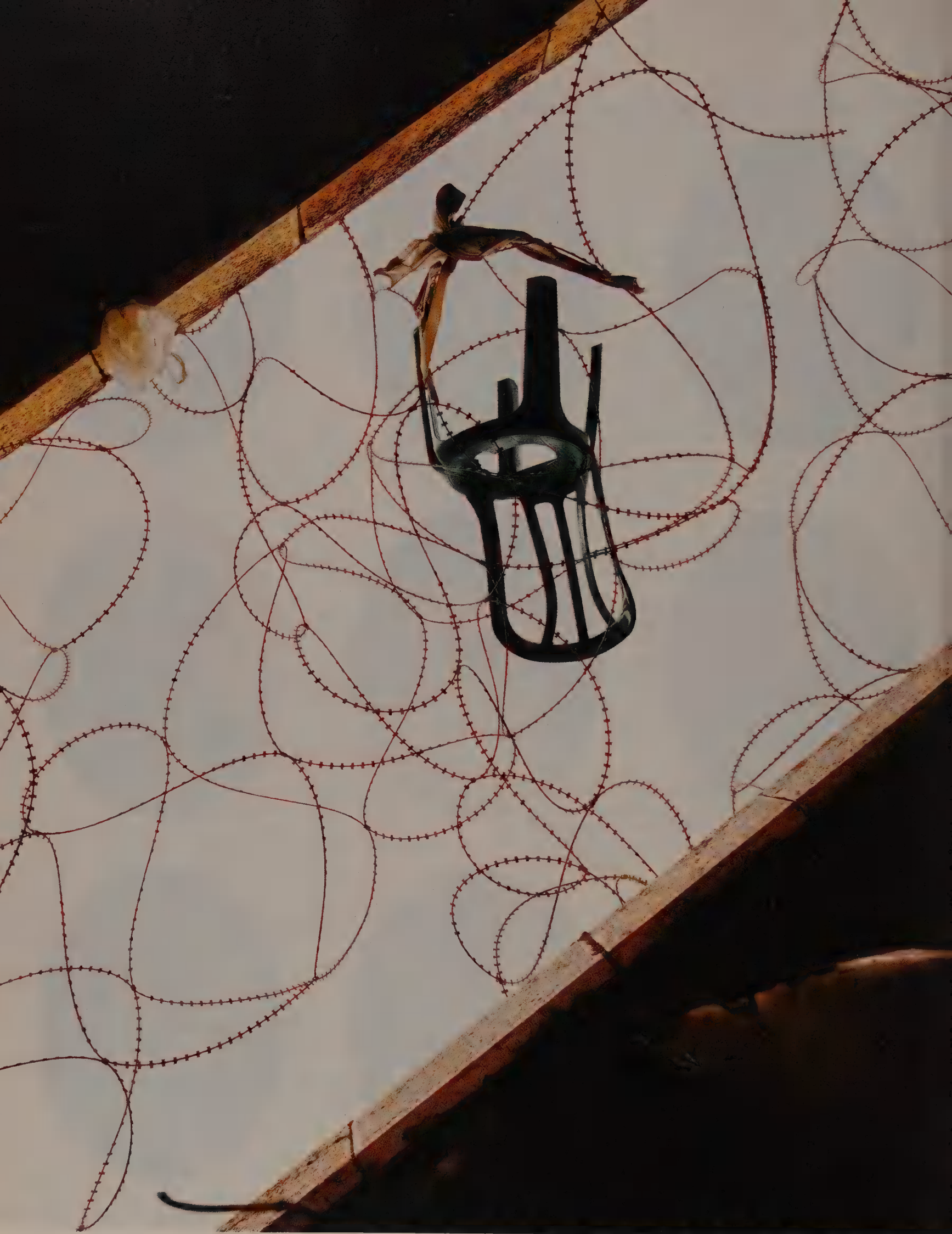
Each length of thread is discarded between the courses,  
between each taste, and placed in a wooden bowl  
laid for the purpose.  
I admire them, but from a distance: as you can tell  
from the rude pleasure I take in telling you.





Photographs by Arne Svenson from his series *The Workers*, which was on view in June at Julie Saul Gallery, in New York City.







# THE TROUBLE WITH ISRAEL

Netanyahu takes the country to the brink

By Bernard Avishai

One day this April, two weeks after the Israeli elections gave Benjamin Netanyahu a fourth term as prime minister, the morning after the framework for a nuclear agreement with Iran was worked out—the morning, as it happened, of the Passover seder—I dropped in at my local cheese shop, which is set back from the main street of Jerusalem’s German Colony. The neighborhood, once the heart of the city’s secular community of Hebrew University faculty and government workers, is now dense with yeshiva graduates wearing the signature knitted yarmulkes of the settlers, the ultra-Orthodox, and the affluent “modern Orthodox” from Toronto, Paris, and Teaneck, New Jersey. The clerk behind the counter—we’ll call him Shachar—the clever, chubby grandson of Polish Jewish immigrants, whose eyes told you he thought he was meant for something better, had hooked me on truffle cheese some years ago, and we often had pleasant conversations when I came in for regular fixes. We did not normally talk politics, except for the occasional sigh over news of corruption or violence. (His grandfather, he had told me, had been a cadre in the Irgun, the militant Zionist underground group.) This time, however, he was buoyant, expectant. “Are you pleased with the election?” he asked me, using the Arabic colloquialism *mabsoot* for “pleased,” as casually as if he were asking whether Passover came in spring.

“Are you out of your mind?” I erupted. “I feel shame for this country.”

Shachar stared at me, more surprised than wounded. I was taking advantage of him: I was his customer, after all. I shifted my tack toward patrio-

tism. “Shachar, how *can* we be pleased? We think we are the only people in the world who live with threat, but we have to work with regional leaders who will work with us. Bibi is taking the country into unprecedented international isolation.”

This gave Shachar his opening. “No,” he replied, “the problem is with Obama. Experts say relations with America have never been better except for him. He doesn’t understand what we’re dealing with here. People on the left”—he meant me, but graciously kept away from the second person—“think they know better but never learn. My other customers from America say he is the worst president ever. Soon we’ll have missiles at Ben Gurion Airport.”

I stiffened my back and told Shachar what I thought of his government, his experts, and his other American customers. But even before I ended my disquisition, I thought: I am missing the point. One lesson the Israeli left *has* refused to learn is that elections are not so much a clash of arguments as an occasion for trafficking in fear. Shachar’s instincts were closer to primordial, and it was such instincts that determined the vote in Jerusalem, and much else in Israel. Netanyahu played on this fear by warning about “Arabs voting in droves” during the election’s closing hours—but Shachar’s real impulse was to find safety in affinity: the sense that things very nearby were dangerous, or could suddenly be made so; that understanding both sides of an argument weakens resolve; that believing in negotiations makes you unfit to conduct them.

You’d think we would have learned some political lessons by now. This election was the ninth

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since 1977 in which parties that challenged Netanyahu's Likud and its ultraright offshoots ended up with just under half of the vote, and left their liberal supporters angry and dumbfounded. About 70 percent of Jerusalem's citizens had voted for the various ultraright parties that eventually made up Netanyahu's governing coalition. These days you pick up the morning paper and feel a thousand cuts: watchdog groups combing Israeli high schools and universities for teachers and professors whose "Zionism" is suspect; Netanyahu using the regulatory powers of the Communications Ministry to entice, or threaten, major media outlets to be friendly to him; the coach of Jerusalem's soccer team explaining why its fans aren't ready for the team to

THE PRESSING PROBLEM  
FOR ISRAEL NOW IS THAT  
THERE IS TOO LITTLE SPACE  
FOR SO MUCH GRIEVANCE

recruit any Arab players. The most common impulse, especially among the young, is to avert one's eyes. In April, Israeli newspapers reported that Gaza's water table was on the

verge of collapse, as if Gazan children weren't already miserable enough. They warned of "thousands of Gazans rush[ing] the Israeli and Egyptian fences" to plead for a drink in the coming summer's scorching heat. Just after this warning it was reported that Israel ranked eleventh in an international happiness index, up there with Switzerland; a popular radio host, Judy Mozes, seized on the second report and, seemingly oblivious to the first, said delightedly, "Israel is always bathed in sun."

The government has razed illegally constructed homes in Israeli Arab cities, after blocking their legal construction. Meanwhile, rabbinic courts, which have strengthened their control over marriage and divorce, have begun blacklisting female "adulterers." Likud and its coalition partners promise to revive a bill that defines Israel as "the nation-state of the Jewish people"—not, pointedly, a state of its citizens, a fifth of whom are Arabs—and demotes Arabic from an official language to something subordinate. This bill envisions Jewish law and heritage serving as an "inspiration" for national laws, mandates that all state symbols be Jewish ones, and reserves the right of citizenship and freedom of movement exclusively to legal Jews—defined as such by the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate. If enacted, the bill would seriously undermine Israel's Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty, the closest thing the country has to a bill of rights.

Recently, a split decision of the High Court of Justice, usually thought of as the last bastion of Israeli liberalism, upheld a law passed by Netanyahu's

last Knesset that allows litigation against anyone who boycotts the products and colleges of West Bank settlers, something my wife and I have been doing for some time—a nonviolent, safely bourgeois form of protest, we thought. In his majority opinion, Justice Elyakim Rubinstein wrote:

The Passover Haggadah discusses this same promise from heaven regarding the survival of the Jewish people despite [the ploys of] its enemies: "And it is this [covenant] that has stood by our fathers and us: For in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from them." There's nothing wrong with the Israeli Knesset giving legal expression to the battle against those who are rising up against us to destroy us.

"Giving legal expression to the battle against those who are rising up against us to destroy us" is, ironically, a paraphrase of Pharaoh's justification for killing every son born to Hebrew slaves. Justice Rubinstein neglected to add that the Haggadah, the guidelines for the Passover seder, also calls for nurturing "all who are hungry," and asks every generation to imagine "leaving Egypt," moving from "slavery to freedom," just as those gospel songs imply.

The most important party that aimed to displace Netanyahu, Isaac Herzog's Labor Party, tried to pander to people like Shachar, hauling out retired generals to endorse it, merging with Tzipi Livni's small centrist Hatnua party, and renaming itself the Zionist Union. But Herzog and Livni never really addressed Shachar's fears. They made what has become the peace camp's ritual claim: that the occupation forces Israelis to choose between a Jewish state and a democracy. They assumed that most voters would refuse to sacrifice either, and would instead push to end Israel's rule over Palestinians. But for residents of Jerusalem especially, the peace camp's claim only strengthens the impulse to reduce or hem in the Arab population: to prompt West Bank Palestinians to move over the Jordan, overthrow the Hashemite monarchy, and make their state on the East Bank.

The more pressing problem, a vulnerability that has deepened in spite of Israel's growing capacity to deter an invasion or an attack from the outside, is that there is too little space for so much grievance. Israel and Palestine north of the Negev Desert together contain some 12 million people within about 5,000 square miles. Their populations share, in effect, an urban infrastructure and, in spite of the tensions, a common business ecosystem, in which Jordan is also a player. (Amman was largely built by the Palestinian bourgeoisie.) They draw water from a common water table and share sewage-treatment facilities. They share a wireless spectrum, diseases, tourists. A robust Palestinian economy is unimaginable without an end to the occupation,





but it is equally unimaginable without Israeli and Jordanian intellectual capital. So any plausible configuration of the two states must also have a common security environment: that is, a common police force, or at least a very high level of security cooperation, that is backed by international monitors and encourages Jordanian participation. In the absence of something along these lines, the occupation seems almost benign by comparison with the chaos that could conceivably occur. Leave aside the violence between Shia and Sunni that is tearing Syria, Iraq, and Yemen apart. A missile fired from the territories could indeed hit an El Al plane on its glide path, just as a yeshiva seminarian off the plaza in front of the Wailing Wall could try to blow up the Al-Aqsa mosque. Majorities on each side may wish for peace, but the means of violence at the disposal of terrorist outliers is great enough to pull down any structure of peace—if, that is, each side holds the government of the other side responsible for random acts of radical hatred. In the best of all possible worlds, Palestinians and Israelis would be deeply interdependent but also deeply fragile: hostage to acts that would polarize the sides and evoke all the old enmities.

The Labor Party, and peace advocates more generally, refused to engage at any level of detail

this time around. Being centrist meant appearing tougher than the left, which meant being too skeptical of the Palestinians to bother floating plans: the party offered nothing concrete about how the two states might work together; there were no demonstrations of cooperation. Herzog and Livni vaguely endorsed the Arab peace initiative of 2002, but they avoided meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, the president of Palestine. When forced to present an actual strategy, they spoke abstractly about separating the populations, a proposal that implied two independent states, which only made things worse. For most Israelis—most Palestinians too, according to West Bank polls—peace was impossible to imagine if it meant trusting the seriousness of the other side's intentions and respecting the other side's sovereignty.

But what other language was available? The obvious word, "confederation," felt too much like a compromise of sacred notions of Jewish sovereignty, and demanded too much faith in the Palestinians. Since before the Oslo Accords, peace advocates have spoken instead of core problems—security, borders, Jerusalem, refugees—as though the solutions to these problems could be found by two separate, sovereign governments. Secretary of state John Kerry, by all accounts, based his failed



shuttle diplomacy on this agenda. A few weeks before the election, the writer Amos Oz put things urgently, and with the mandatory reservations, in a speech: "We and the Palestinians cannot become one happy family tomorrow because we are not one, we are not happy, and we are not a family. We are two unhappy families. We need a fair divorce and not a honeymoon."

The point is, security will be meaningless to people like Shachar unless the other problems can be resolved within political models that impose a high degree of mutual constraint and include Jordan

tional commission" for compensating and resettling Palestinian refugees. As I have written in these pages before, a confederation would make it easier to solve the vexed problem of "return," since residency could then be distinguished from citizenship. Some settlers could remain Israeli citizens yet live outside the Green Line; some Palestinian refugees could become Palestinian citizens yet live within the Green Line.

After the election, and to his credit, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin, a former member of Likud, gave an interview to a group of journalists in which



in the mix. This is no longer the landscape of the 1950s, when "divorce" seemed plausible—when a couple of million people on each side of the Green Line that divides Israel from its Arab neighbors competed to control the hilltops so that their respective farmers could plow the valleys. Each side is now connected to the other as much as to anywhere else. Talk of separation only mocks the condition that Israelis and Palestinians find themselves in.

Curiously, proposals that gesture toward a confederation have been missing from the discourse of the peace camp, though the idea has been yanked in every time good-faith negotiations for two states have taken place: the joint patrols and security cooperation that were featured in the 1993 Oslo Accords, the virtual common market that was envisioned by the 1994 Paris Protocol. A shared municipal government for Jerusalem and an international custodian for the Old City were both contemplated during the 2008 negotiations between Abbas and former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. Even on the Palestinian right of return, Olmert and Abbas agreed on an "internal

he seemed to grasp the conundrum. "Maybe we can live in a federation," he said. "We will not have peace unless we have open borders." More recently, Yossi Beilin, an architect of the Oslo Accords, endorsed the idea of a confederation in a *New York Times* op-ed. He recalled that he and his former Palestinian interlocutor, the late Faisal Husseini, had discussed such an arrangement before the Accords were signed. But during the election, Herzog and Livni were loath to mention the idea, since it could be so easily mischaracterized as suggesting—how did Oz put it?—"one happy family." Instead they advanced the older ideal of separate states, the flip side of a so-called Zionist solidarity that makes little room for Arab citizenship. It is as if the peace camp were saying: the Jewish state doesn't want so many Arabs, so let's give them land of their own and maybe they'll leave us alone. Shachar wasn't buying it.

**N**etanyahu had no good answer to the prospect of "missiles at Ben Gurion Airport." His presumption that Israel must be resigned to

Left: Men erect a plaque commemorating two Israeli traffic policemen who were killed on duty in the West Bank, close to the Jordanian border. Right: A rock from Masada, a site of ancient palaces and fortifications in the Judean Desert. During the First Jewish–Roman War, a siege of the fortress by the Roman Empire led to the mass suicide of the Jewish Sicarii rebels, who preferred death to surrender. Photographs by Zed Nelson



regular rounds of violence has only increased the potential for attacks from outside Israel—from Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza. What Netanyahu does have is a simple (and crafty) “no.” The status quo has legitimized the environment he wishes to maintain: the occupation, which purportedly exists to foil Palestinian enmity, manages a burgeoning network of informers and furthers the creeping annexation of the West Bank, the “land of Israel.” Since the election, his government has announced new construction in East Jerusalem. So Netanyahu gains merely by obstructing change, freezing voters in place, at once fomenting the fear and exacerbating the threat. He demands that Abbas accept Israel as a Jewish state, as if the fragility created by Israel’s geography and demography can be obviated by Palestinians endorsing the Zionist narrative. Abbas, of course, refuses to entertain the idea, not least because a fifth of Israeli citizens are Arabs. But that causes no problem for Netanyahu; Abbas cannot control Hamas, and so there can be no Palestinian state anyway. There is “no partner,” he says, so he will not accept Kerry’s framework for peace—not unless Palestinians can prove they can be trusted. And that can only happen if they demonstrate a frame of mind that would have precluded any conflict in the first place.

There’s an analogy here to the political genius of congressional Republicans in the United States, Bibi’s friends, who have likewise gained by elevating inertia to a principle of action. They know that they cannot say they are for keeping things as they are, which would make them advocates for plutocracy and inequality, for which there is no majority. So instead they say that they are only against “government,” and act in ways to resist or sabotage the workings of the state apparatus. Ordinary people start saying that Washington is broken, journalists flock to valorize the voice of the frustrated citizen—and Republicans win. It’s the perfect con.

Netanyahu has his own version of a con. He knows that he cannot just say that he wants Greater Israel for neo-Zionist reasons; there is no electoral majority in support of the settlers. So instead he merely derides “trust.” Established facts do the rest. (Machiavelli figured out this ploy a long time ago. “There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success,” he writes in *The Prince*, “than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new ... [but] do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them.”)

Netanyahu cultivates an atmosphere of morbid frustration, an uncertainty about Israel’s staying power that owes more to the ground of Jerusalem than to the skies over Tel Aviv. The uncertainty grows every time a young Palestinian fanatic blows up Israeli civilians in a quiet restaurant and leaves behind a video of himself quoting the Koran. For people in Greater Tel Aviv, the Palestinian state is a kind of defensible abstraction; more than 60 percent of the electorate there voted for the parties opposed to Netanyahu. For Shachar, and for me, the Palestinian state would be virtually around the block. Within a mile of our neighborhood, there were a dozen bombings of restaurants and buses between 2000 and 2004. Much of the recent electoral campaign was taken up by Netanyahu’s controversial speech to Congress and his railing against Obama’s Iran deal. We heard talk of Islamic enmity and existential threat. But this preoccupation with Iran is deceiving.

Attitudes about Iran do not eclipse the despair about the Palestinians but are rather the product of it.

Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, Netanyahu and his

ministers insist, must be “dismantled and neutralized,” their euphemism for the Iranian regime simply disarming and surrendering under the threat of an American military strike. He complains that Obama’s projected deal settles for a plan to “freeze and inspect.” Ehud Barak, Bibi’s former defense minister, who had also strongly advocated in Washington for an American bombing run on Iran’s nuclear installations, told CNBC in April: “Either they dismantle their military nuclear program or else.” Or else what? In a similar vein, Netanyahu insisted again and again that increased economic pressure and the threat of military action would force Iran to capitulate to a “better deal”—one, he suggested, that would end all threats against Israel, irrespective of the Palestine issue.

In truth, however, Netanyahu has not been able to bring even Hamas’s comparatively puny forces in Gaza to capitulate, not after years of economic strangulation and, recently, tens of thousands of shells and air strikes and thousands dead. Intimidation may bring Republicans to their feet but not Iranians to their knees. Nor does Netanyahu, Barak, or anyone else have any idea where an American strike against Iran might lead. Consider that Iran can seriously disrupt shipping in the Persian Gulf, that Iran’s proxy, Hezbollah, can use its advanced missiles to shut down Israel’s economy. Consider, too, that America cannot tolerate the former nor Israel the latter. These facts add up to the ideal

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ingredients for a regional conflagration, and yet this logic does not seem to shake Netanyahu's determination. He may fancy himself a new Churchill given another chance to preempt Hitler in 1938. But he sounds more like Curtis LeMay, the Air Force general who headed the Strategic Air Command and said in 1965 that China would have the capacity to deliver bombs as soon as twenty-five years in the future, and that therefore the United States should entertain the "destruction of the Chinese military potential before the situation grows worse."

What Netanyahu did not say, what every Iranian leader and any reader of *Jane's Defence Weekly* knows, is that Israel is the world's sixth most powerful nuclear power, with a second-strike capacity: upward of 200 warheads that can be placed on airborne and

submarine-based missiles. Being willing to incinerate Tel Aviv (which, by the way, also means irradiating Gaza and the West Bank) would mean being willing to

sacrifice Tehran, Qom, and Isfahan. Nor can Netanyahu claim any special insight about what leaders will do when they have the capacity to kill an enemy's civilization at the risk of having their own killed in retaliation. He has been selling the idea that Iran's bomb is a genocidal threat, but he's been counting on ordinary Israelis thinking of the bomb as an enormous suicide vest. The opportunity that Netanyahu has failed to embrace with Iran—and not coincidentally, also with Palestine, particularly Gaza—is a diplomatic process, like Richard Nixon's with China, based on reciprocity and international guarantees, economic rehabilitation, and, eventually, a generational change in attitudes. Netanyahu's rhetoric was righteous, mythic, self-aggrandizing; the Intifadas, seared in Israeli imaginations, provided the images.

**Y**et it would be wrong to assume that future Likud victories are secure. The Orthodox and ultraright parties that were the foundation for Netanyahu's earlier coalitions won only fifty-seven seats in this last election. Two years ago, they won sixty-one; in 2009, sixty-five. The coalition that Netanyahu put together this spring rests on a one-seat majority.

The real story of the recent election was the emergence of an Israeli center: represented not only by Herzog's merger with Livni, which won twenty-four seats, but also by Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid ("There Is a Future") and Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu ("Together") parties. The latter two won twenty-one Knesset seats, or 18 percent of the

total, and seem to be gaining in popularity. Israel's electoral landscape is changing; Kahlon, a former Likudnik from a Libyan family, gave Netanyahu his majority and can, at any time, take Netanyahu down.

Kahlon's and Lapid's parties are focused in slightly different ways on economic inequalities, but they also emphasize social liberalism (gay rights, religious freedom), and therefore get votes in the major cities. They are careful to distance themselves from the ideological right. Yet they are mainstream—which is to say, militant and dismissive—where the Palestinian peace process is concerned, and they speak of Jewish national solidarity—their version of Zionism—in apologetic ways that imply a favored legal status for Jewish citizens not very different from Likud's position. They are rightists in the sense that they are reactionary, and therefore skeptical of the left, but centrist in their unwillingness to be identified with either Arabs or settlers.

Their most significant gains are among Israel's young, a difficult concept in the context of Israel, since it pertains to the children and grandchildren of immigrant groups who came at different times (so that, for instance, younger voters from self-identified Moroccan families can be in their forties and fifties, and younger Russian voters in their thirties and forties). The mean age in Israel is around thirty; pollster Dahlia Scheindlin told me that young people who lean toward the center "are tired and despairing of the ideological claims and don't really believe the conflict can be solved; so they connect to fresher politicians, to 'quality of life' issues: "The electorate now supports two significant center parties, and many of their votes come from kingmaker demographic groups who used to favor the right: Russian immigrants and Mizrahim—the generation of Russians who have grown up in Israel and the third-generation Mizrahim." (Mizrahim are Jews from Arab countries.) This younger electorate follows the Cleveland Cavaliers, travels to Peru, sells to Berlin. They expect to fly with a passport that they won't have to keep hidden when they land.

Younger voters who animate the center constitute a departure from the identity politics that used to all but guarantee Likud its victories. For a long time, Israeli pundits have spoken almost universally about five (at times overlapping) electoral "demographics," each of which represents about 20 percent of the population: veteran, pioneering Europeans; Palestinians who became citizens after 1948; Mizrahim; stridently Orthodox Jews of all kinds, Zionist or non-Zionist; and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. For very old reasons, Likud has

## THE REAL STORY BEHIND THE RECENT ELECTION WAS THE EMERGENCE OF AN ISRAELI CENTER, ANIMATED BY YOUNGER VOTERS



long held a hugely disproportionate appeal among the last three groups. Mizrahi voters in particular resented the secular, European Jewish Labor establishment that controlled the economy and seemed to condescend to their traditional religiosity when they arrived after 1948. But among Israelis aged eighteen to thirty-four, the issues are not so clear. Alongside the expected social liberalism there is a stronger trend toward religiosity than among older Israelis—"more Jewishness, less Israeli-ness," as a friend put it. My impression, from

Ofakim and Ashdod, places to which the state's Labor Zionist founders sent them when they arrived destitute—vote as consistently for Likud as poor evangelical whites in Indiana vote Republican. The more recently arrived Russians, for their part, reject any parties that carry the scent of socialism; they like the Putinist strongman talk they hear from Likud leaders such as Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon, and think their cynical view of international affairs to be only realistic. As for "halachic" Israelis—an incongruous mix of ultra-Zionist, Orthodox settlers and



dozens of conversations, is that younger "Russians" are more cosmopolitan than their parents. Mizrahi youth, too, expect to be in the world, and are ambivalent about the money spent on settlers. What's more, young Israelis intermarry at so high a rate that the division between Ashkenazim (Jews from Eastern Europe) and Mizrahim seems increasingly strange to them.

Still, they despair that diplomacy can achieve any results with the Palestinian Authority, and they regard Hamas with loathing. They may be less ideologically fixed than their parents, but they are more easily impressed by personalities, headlines, and world events. Their associations are reflexive: "America?" Freedom. "Washington?" Friendship. "Europe?" Hypocrisy (and vacations). "Values?" Army service. "History?" Holocaust. "Orthodox?" Spongers. "Arabs?" Chaos. "Palestinians?" "Fuck 'em." (Shachar, I later learned, voted for Kahlon.)

Poor, less-educated Mizrahi voters, especially those who live in small cities outside the Tel Aviv-Haifa urban corridor—cities such as

non-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox theocrats—they mostly support Likud because of that party's peculiar notion of Israel as a state of world Jewry that subordinates democratic liberalism to rabbinic influence.

The resentment goes both ways, though it is not politically correct to say so. During a mass rally of peace groups in early March, which was meant to showcase an attack on Netanyahu's Iran policy by Meir Dagan, a former director of the Mossad, the artist Yair Garbuz complained that the state was controlled by "amulet kissers, idol worshippers, and people who prostrate themselves at the graves of saints." In April, a document from 1962 was released in which David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding prime minister, admitted his disdain for the lack of education among the Mizrahim. ("The problem is ... [t]hey will be the majority of the nation," he told a colleague in the recently disclosed document: "They have six-to-eight children and the Ashkenazim only two children.... The question is whether they will lower the nation or [whether]



we will succeed by artificial means and with great efforts to elevate them.”) The Labor Party, in this context, has for two generations been reduced to counting on the vote of the children and grandchildren of revolutionary European Zionists who thought that by emigrating to Israel they were inventing a modern social democracy and secular Hebrew culture.

Herzog knows that he could never win a Knesset majority without the center parties and their xenophobic youth vote; nor, ironically, could he succeed without parliamentary support from the Arab parties. The balancing act can be gyrating. In a speech from the Knesset podium, Herzog went out of his way to condemn Netanyahu for his (now famous) racist incitement against Arabs, yet the name Herzog chose for his merged party, Zionist Union, was itself a signal to centrist voters that he and Livni would put up a KEEP OUT sign for Palestinians. A big-tent democratic party, one that absorbed and superseded Labor, would be the obvious next step to court voters who support parties now in opposition: leftists, more liberal centrists, and Arabs (very few Arabs would support Likud in the Knesset). It was Labor’s military leaders, people like Herzog’s father, Chaim, the sixth president of Israel, who defeated and expelled—or just didn’t let back—the Arab refugees of 1948. The hawkishness of the center parties reflects a dark anxiety, but these parties might also, in time, offer a solution, precisely because they lack ideological rigor. The young might change things, in other words—for that is what young people do—but they would need a hope, and a fear, in the foreground to eclipse the background threat that Netanyahu relies on.

I am speaking, of course, of bringing international, and mainly American, pressure to bear. How the Netanyahu government deals with Palestinians under the occupation, and, correspondingly, how it deals with its internal Arab minority, is not merely an internal affair—certainly not given Israel’s claim on the military and economic resources of the United States. The imperative to deal with these matters might be seen through an analogy suggested by an unexpected source. If the Israeli election produced anything like a transformational leader, it was not in the Jewish left but in the Arab mainstream: Ayman Odeh, the forty-year-old lawyer who helped found a new party, the Joint List—an amalgamation of mainly Arab parties. The party, which Odeh now leads, captured thirteen Knesset seats. He demonstrated, among other things, that leadership of the Arab community has passed to a younger generation of professionals who do not dwell in the past but are focused on giving Israeli citizenship a secular meaning. He debated rightist leaders with remarkable dignity,

rejecting discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity and arguing for the integration of Arabs into a broadened civil society. When Ethiopian Jews protested against discrimination on the streets of Tel Aviv, Odeh marched with them. “Just as Jews in the U.S. joined Martin Luther King,” he said, “I’m sure hundreds of thousands of Jews will join the struggle for civil equality in Israel.”

Odeh’s analogy to the American civil-rights movement may be a little wistful, but it’s not that far-fetched. Like American Southerners in the Sixties, most Israelis feel that they are the custodians of a quasi-divine cause, one born of terrible sacrifice and engendered by memories of slaughter. For Jewish Israelis to acknowledge that justice is necessary for the subjugated minority in their midst is often seen as a betrayal of the foundational story people tell and retell in order to achieve cohesion. Integration seems a menacing abstraction when compared with the memory of the events that suggested the need for a Jewish state. But Israelis also expect to be part of a wider world, and espouse, even if they do not fully enact, the norms of liberal democracy. Which is another way of saying what Odeh may think but does not admit: that this is a society that will generate something like Netanyahu’s infuriating majority for the foreseeable future—unless there is pressure from the outside, in which case serious change will almost certainly come.

A majority for change can be built, in other words, but not in the absence of pressure from Washington. Barack Obama undoubtedly hopes to make a difference before he leaves office, if only to pose a moral alternative to Netanyahu’s stridency, much as Odeh does. And Obama obviously wishes to leave a legacy of progress toward a Palestinian state, which would improve Jordan’s chance of survival and calm anti-Americanism in Arab states. The question is, what kind of pressure will accomplish more than vague allusions to “two states”?

Wendy Sherman, an undersecretary of state, told American Jewish leaders in April that the administration will be “watching very closely to see what happens on this [Palestinian] issue after the new government is formed.” She implied that if the Netanyahu government continued to block a Palestinian state, as Netanyahu said he would during the election, it would “be harder” for the administration to block resolutions in the U.N. Security Council endorsing a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. (The French are likely to introduce just such a resolution in the coming months.) This warning was long overdue. The Obama Administration had no defensible rationale for vetoing resolutions condemning the settlements or backing a Palestinian state, except as concessions to Netan-



yahu and AIPAC, who insisted that all issues should be left to bilateral negotiations. In 2009, Netanyahu refused to negotiate on the basis of what was agreed between Abbas and Olmert, and, in 2011, he torpedoed a framework agreement that had been worked out between Abbas and then Israeli president Shimon Peres. Kerry, who failed to mediate an agreement last year, eventually came to the conclusion that Netanyahu was just stringing him along. The conclusion was belated at best.

But “watching very closely” hardly seems enough at this point. The composition of Netanyahu’s new government does not portend anything but the continuation of his cynical game. It is stacked with partners who have made their careers promising privileges to those with J-positive blood. Naftali Bennett, for instance, the leader of the Jewish Home party, who thinks that Gaza should be invaded, gay rights are wrong, and university intellectuals should stop apologizing for Jews taking back their land, is the new minister of education. Ayelet Shaked, a powerful figure in the Jewish Home party, is the new justice minister. Likud’s own Miri Regev, who has campaigned for the expulsion of Sudanese refugees and said that she is “happy to be a fascist,” is the new culture minister. Uri Ariel, a settler leader, is the new agriculture minister. In all, Netanyahu promised ultranationalist and Orthodox leaders that he would provide about \$500 million for new housing in East Jerusalem and for new Orthodox schools at all levels in which subjects like math, science, and English will not be taught. In Israel the head of the government cannot just appoint whom he or she pleases to the cabinet; the party leaders of Likud and its ultraright coalition partners share the task of governing. To imagine that some new Netanyahu pronouncement endorsing two states will mean an actual change of policy is to believe that a government of John McCain, Dick Cheney, Ted Cruz, Sarah Palin, Pat Robertson, and Marco Rubio would expand the Affordable Care Act because they condemn “inequality.”

If Kerry wants to make a difference, he cannot fall back on vague formulations. He told a congressional committee in the spring of 2014 that it had been a mistake to allow Netanyahu to hinge progress on Abbas recognizing Israel as a Jewish state. That’s a start. But Kerry cannot expect any peace process to work if he fails to sketch out a detailed plan for security cooperation between Israel and Palestine, with international forces on the ground, beginning with setting terms for rehabilitating Gaza. Any suggestion advanced by Obama, or by Hillary Clinton, for that matter, that Abbas needs to re-

solve matters with Israel through bilateral negotiations should be dismissed as cynical and cruel. Netanyahu’s government will not negotiate in good faith, and he will not stop the settlement project while negotiations are under way. Nor, paradoxically, is diplomatic caution likely to mitigate violence. The opposite is true. A fuzzy vision for the future will be filled in by ordinary Israelis and Palestinians with apocalyptic imaginings culled from past atrocities. Mohammad Mustafa, the head of the Palestine Investment Fund, told me that, before the Oslo process began in 1993, per capita GDP in the Occupied Territories was about a third more than Egypt’s; today it is a third less. And new violence in the West Bank will almost certainly spread to refugee camps on the outskirts of Amman. The collapse of Jordan, which has the Islamic State on its borders and is struggling to support a million Syrian refugees, is the next catastrophe that will result from failing to solve the Palestine situation.

Kerry should look beyond the Netanyahu government. He should make clear that the governance of Jerusalem and the holy sites of the Old City is inconceivable without shared sovereignty, which implies new confederal arrangements, and an international presence. He should understand that Jerusalem, over time, could serve as a model for an economic confederation of the two states. He should support any Security Council resolution that condemns the settlements and sanctions Israel for continuing them, not veto it, as the Obama Administration did in 2011. To avoid an explosion—which, alas, Israelis would never blame Netanyahu for—young people on both sides need to see a workable, reciprocal blueprint for their future.

But serious pressure can come from other Western societies too. Right now, in Israel, it is against the law for me to suggest that democrats around the world demand to know which products or professors come from the settlements, and boycott them, so I won’t do that. It is similarly against the law to suggest that FIFA boycott Israel’s national soccer team if it includes any players from teams that refuse to field Israeli Arabs, so I won’t do that either. I won’t say that Palestinians are justified in bringing the settlements and other violations of the Geneva conventions to the International Criminal Court. Some American Jewish organizations will call such pressure “anti-Israel.” I *will* say that this is nonsense. What Netanyahu proved when he spoke to Congress is that as America is divided, Israel is divided. Netanyahu chose which Americans he considered allies in his generalized war on terror and which he did not. Americans, too, have to choose which Israelis stand for democratic values, and which do not. ■





FROM THE ARCHIVE

84 years ago in

Harper's Magazine

# OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

*By a School-Teacher*

One day my schoolchildren, aged from seven to eleven years, wrote compositions on the subject of "Grown-ups." The word had been written on the board, and they were told to write whatever idea it brought to their minds with the promise that the compositions would not be read aloud in class. They had no chance to talk it over with the other children, nor much time to think about it in the bare half hour allowed them. These papers, sixty-one in number, were brought to me uncorrected, and I read them with much interest and a little dismay.

Let me begin with a few general descriptions:

"You are a grown-up person when you are married or over 29. When you are grown-up you can boss yourself."

Letitia's definition is even briefer: "Grown-ups are people who boss you."

Agnes says that grown-ups are "very much different than children. They think we are cold when we aren't and make us put on coats and hats when we don't want to. They make me very mad at times and other times make me very happy but never mediom. They are either very quite or very noisy. They don't have as much fun as we do. Their hair is always fixt and hands washed. It has always been a mistory to me how they do it."

On the other hand, Lucy says that "grown-ups are just children that have stretched"—a surprising point of view for a child of eleven years.

She continued: "They are nice most of the time. But you've got to be careful. They get cross quite a lot. They are always talking grown-up things, stock market and such. They are everlastingly going to meetings and luncheons and stuff. They'll have parties and play contract bridge, what fun do you get out of it?"

The liberty to do as one pleases makes grown-ups enviable to many of the children. Thus Constance writes: "I would like to be a grown-up because I could go to bed when I felt like it and in the summertime I could go swimming when I felt like it so no one could say 'You can't go swimming today because its too damp and you have a cold.'"

But Eleanor "would hate to be a grown-up and not be able to go to parties and have to clean up the house and have to boss everboddy and have them call you bossy. And have to put things in your hair to make it curly. And put your hair up in knots. And where long stockings and long dresses. But they would not have to go to school and have lots of homework and they can stay up late at night."

Molly is even severer: "I should hate to be a grown-up, but I guess I'll

have to be one some day until I die. I think I'll stab myself or commit suicide when I'm almost twenty years old. But in one way I think I would like to be one so I could boss myself and not have a lot of people say, 'Molly do this and Molly do that!'"

Even in some of the most youthful papers there is a note of outspoken rebellion. Paul struggles to express as well as an eight-year-old can what is wrong with his parents and his relations with them. "Grown-ups give me a pain in the neck. They are too stuck up. When everybody else is going swimming—no you can't go. You have to obey them or get scolded and then you get mad and scolded some more. Sometimes I get scolded I throw things at people so they try to keep me from getting mad. Once I was scolded for something I didn't do and I got so mad I broke three windows and seven glasses I threw books and magazines at everybody I saw."

Arthur is Paul's twin soul; he starts his indictment in the same words: "Grown-ups give me a pain in the neck. I don't like them because they try to boss you around a lot and say you must go up and brush your hair or you mustn't have to much candy. Or don't run because you have a little cold. I would like to take them over my knee and give them a good spanking and make them yell once." ■

From "Parents as Children See Them," which appeared in the December 1931 issue of Harper's Magazine. The complete essay—along with the magazine's entire 165-year archive—is available online at [harpers.org/fromthearchive](http://harpers.org/fromthearchive).

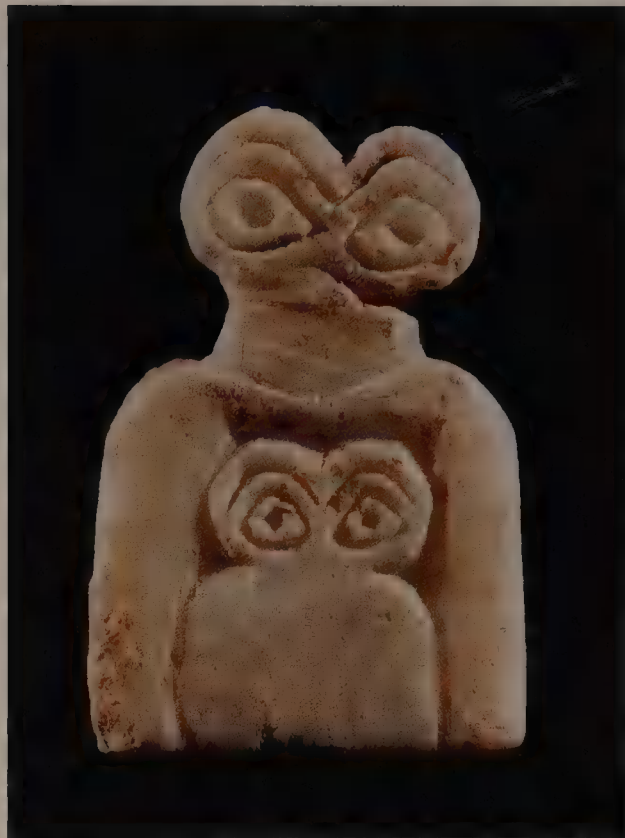


# HOW TO BE A PARENT

By A. Balkan, Emma Donoghue, Pamela Druckerman,  
Rivka Galchen, Karl Taro Greenfeld, Ben Lerner,  
Sarah Manguso, Claire Messud, Ellen Rosenbush,  
and Michelle Tea

These are tough times for parents. Not because child rearing has gotten any harder—it's the same as it ever was—but because we are newly over-rich in hand-wringing books and articles on the subject. The decision to have children, according to these panicked dispatches, is only the first in a cascade of choices that will either make or break your kid, save or ruin your life.

This forum, however, is not prescriptive but descriptive: not "how you should" but "how we have," which is probably the best kind of advice a mother or



father could give. The poem and the essays that follow tell you things about being a parent that you can't get from a jeremiad about having it all or a numbered list of sleep-training tips. (If we really wanted to give you parenting advice, we probably wouldn't be including a poem, which, as Ben Lerner puts it, is a great place "to make information disappear.") The ten writers we brought together describe at least ten ways of being a parent, with room for disagreement and contradiction. There is no life-hacking here—just life.

## CONTRIBUTORS

A. Balkan is a poet who lives in New York.

Emma Donoghue is the author of the novel *Room* (Little, Brown) and the screenwriter of the film adaptation, which will be released later this year.

Pamela Druckerman is the author of *Bringing Up Bébé*, *Bébé Day by Day*, and *Lust in Translation* (all Penguin Press).

Rivka Galchen writes the culture column for *Harper's Magazine*. A book-length essay, *Little Labors*, will be published next year by *New Directions*.

Karl Taro Greenfeld's most recent novel, *The Subprimes*, was published in May by *Harper Books*.

Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* was published last year. A monograph, *The Hatred of Poetry*, is forthcoming from *Farrar, Straus and Giroux*.

Sarah Manguso is the author, most recently, of *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (Graywolf).

Claire Messud's most recent novel is *The Woman Upstairs* (Knopf).

Ellen Rosenbush is the editor of *Harper's Magazine*.

Michelle Tea is the author, most recently, of *How to Grow Up* (Plume).



# THE GRAND SHATTERING

By Sarah Manguso

I never wanted to be a mother. I wanted to be a person. My identity crisis began at age three, when I wanted to be Popeye but realized that I had to be Olive Oyl instead. I remember throwing myself down on my bed, wondering how I'd ever figure it out. I remember exactly how I felt because I feel that way still.

Bombarded by inviolable stereotypes that distinguished between Mommy and all other roles, I decided that I would be a boy in the shape of a girl, a man in the shape of a woman. My early fantasies were of fighting with the boys in my second-grade class and then making out with them. I wore boys' clothes well into middle school, and even after I caught on that girls were supposed to peg their jeans and wear sweaters with brightly colored triangles and squares, I wasn't willing to begin that drag performance. Not yet.

I moved to New York when I was twenty-three. My friends were already getting married. My plan, which I didn't mind telling anyone who brought up marriage, progeny, or real estate, was to wait until all my friends got married and left town. Then I'd move upstate, buy a little house, and seduce my neighbors' teenage boys until I died of loneliness or old age.

A man who used to cuff and clamp me, and who once cut a hole in my tights with his coke razor and fucked me through it, became a close friend. One month I had an unusually heavy period. *I think I might actually be having a miscarriage,* I told him. *At least you aren't having a kid,* he replied, shuddering. We both laughed.

For years, I asked writers who were also mothers how they prioritized the various components of their identities—was Writer below Mother, and if so, would it be possible to reverse that? One woman told me

that her identity wasn't a ladder but a pie chart containing slices of variable sizes. That answer sounded to me like an oblique admission that she wasn't a writer first. Since I didn't want to be anything but a writer first, I dismissed her.

In my twenties, I couldn't imagine a meaningful life in which I didn't have as much time for silent contemplation as I had then. I couldn't understand the mothers who assumed that I envied them or that motherhood was my goal.

I didn't believe that motherhood could be more joyous than my existing life. To me, mothers were people who had decided that a life without children, my life, wasn't fulfilling enough, wasn't joyous enough. Before my son was born, my life was full. There was nothing missing. There was no reason to have a child. The longer I sought a reason, the more remote such a reason seemed.

As the years passed, I came to see how many serious women writers were and are mothers, and that my fear—that being a mother would prevent me from being a writer—might be irrational. Perhaps having a child might make me a better writer, I thought. Or perhaps if I didn't have a child, I might become a worse writer, or maybe even a worse person.

I didn't want a child. Even after I decided to become pregnant, I didn't want a child. I conceived one as a hedge against future regret.

Before I became a mother I imagined I would be a writer at some times and a mother at others, but I cannot compartmentalize the two activities. Motherhood has no compartment; I am always a mother. If the babysitter's car breaks down, if my son steps on a bee at the park, if my husband needs to travel for work, I am a mother first. I'm a mother even when I'm writing.

My subjects haven't changed, and neither has my form, but the quality of attention of this new mind, the mind of someone who is responsible for a helpless person, is different—more distractible and therefore more desperate not to be distracted.

Before I became a mother I believed that writing was the center of my life. Everything else revolved around it—day jobs, relationships, family commitments. It didn't feel like a choice; I was in thrall to the need to write. Some metaphysical force impelled me. To support my writing I skipped food and sleep, kept ridiculous hours, traveled to distant residencies. I always believed that the point of writing for an audience was to rescue the suicidal and to console the dying. But the point of motherhood is to help someone immediately, to console a person who is right there next to you. Writing is a choice, I've learned—for my son's helplessness leaves me no choice.

I now look back at my old life, when I believed myself to be as happy and fulfilled as a person could be, with the same maternal pity I used to despise. It seems obvious to me that my refusal to have a child was a way to avoid the challenges of extreme love, to avoid participating in dismantling the stereotypes that had brainwashed me.

I pre-mourning the end of my writing career and writer-self throughout my pregnancy, but the crisis I anticipated never arrived. Now I merely feel like a writer who is a mother, or a mother who is a writer, depending on my immediate circumstances. The fear that I'd stop being a writer, whatever that means, is gone.

I used to believe that maximizing the number of hours reading, writing, and thinking about writing would make me the best writer I could be, and that my friend who had chosen to have three children just didn't value being a writer as much as I did. Then I had a child and found that the amount of time I spend writing isn't the only thing that makes me a better writer. I also grow by weathering trauma, practicing patience, being seasoned by love.





Before I had my son I was convinced that motherhood would ruin my writing and cause a profound loss of self that would never be compensated. My old self is indeed gone, but I perceive the world more carefully and more lovingly than before because I am more aware of the effects of love and of time on an individual person. And I am more aware of the limits of love and of time.

The biggest change that motherhood has wrought on me is this: whether or not I'm happy is no longer the central question of my life. This disposition is often mischaracterized as selflessness. But if it is in fact selflessness, it isn't a willed state. I feel the need to care for my son as an itch, an urge. This is what people mean when they describe the rearing of young as a biological necessity. Lest you accuse me of wanting only to usher my own DNA into the future, I'll tell you a little story.

When my son was almost three, one of my friends sent me a photo-

graph of her newborn daughter. My phone twitched and I pressed the little button and saw the face of a baby in profile, milk-drunk. My breasts tingled with an unmistakable feeling. They were filling with milk. I hadn't nursed my son in nearly two years. No milk had come in all that time, but now I squeezed my nipples, and milk came out. If there were an earthquake, a bombing, I could nurse the orphans.

Those who are not on intimate terms with illness, poverty, violence, exile, and war are fundamentally different from those who are. That difference isn't a choice; it's simply there, a gulf that cannot be bridged. I can't know what it's like to be an orphan, for example, and few of my friends know, as I do, what it's like to be seriously ill. Those who have not passed through the gauntlet of motherhood cannot be equal in experience to those who have.

Women who deride motherhood as merely an animal condition have accepted the patriarchal belief that motherhood is trivial. It's true that motherhood can seem trivial to women who have been insulated from the demands of others; they are given few reasons to value motherhood and many reasons to value individual fulfillment. They are taught, as I was, to value self-realization as the essential component of success, the index of one's contribution to the world, the test of our basic humanity. Service to the world was understood as a heroic act achieved by a powerful ego. Until I'd burrowed out from under those beliefs, being a writer seemed a worthier goal than being a mother.

The point of having a child is to be rent asunder, torn in two.

Years before I had my son I heard of an artist explaining why she had decided to become a mother: *I didn't want to reach the end of my life intact*. Imperious, I judged this to be sentimental—permanently damaged by a chronic illness, I considered myself already ruined and misunderstood by the healthy and normal. And what is more normal than the ability to give birth? But motherhood is a different sort of damage. It is a shattering, a disintegration of the self, after which the original form is quite gone. Still, it is a breakage that we are, as a species if not as individuals, meant to survive.

I want to read books that were written in desperation, by people who are disturbed and overtaxed, who balance on the extreme edge of experience. I want to read books by people who are acutely aware that death is coming and that abiding love is our last resort. And I want to write those books.



# NOTES ON SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS

By Rivka Galchen

**F**lannery O'Connor: No children.

Eudora Welty: No children. One children's book.

Katherine Anne Porter: No children, many miscarriages.

Hilary Mantel, Janet Frame, Willa Cather, Jane Bowles, Patricia Highsmith, Elizabeth Bishop, Hannah Arendt, Iris Murdoch, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Mavis Gallant, Simone de Beauvoir, Barbara Pym: No children.

Jean Stafford: No children. Three husbands.

Alice Munro: Two husbands. Raised three children. First book of stories at age thirty-seven.

Toni Morrison: Two children. First novel at age thirty-nine.

Penelope Fitzgerald: Three children. First novel at age sixty. Then eight more.

John Updike: Many children. Many books.

Saul Bellow: Many children. Many wives. Many books.

Doris Lessing: Left two of her three children to be raised by their father. Later semi-adopted a teenage girl, a peer of one of her sons. Said there was "nothing more boring for an intelligent woman than to spend endless amounts of time with small children."

Muriel Spark: One child, born in Southern Rhodesia during her marriage to Sidney Oswald Spark, who suffered from manic depression. Moved to London alone, leaving behind her husband. Her young son, also left behind, ended up in the care of some fruit sellers down the road, before he eventually

moved to Scotland to live with his maternal grandparents. The child was later disinherited by his mother, who was annoyed, it is said, that he went around complaining that his mother wouldn't admit she was Jewish. Among other things.

Rebecca West: Had one child with H. G. Wells, to whom she was not married. Tried to convince the child that she was his aunt and not his mother. In 1955, the child wrote a roman à clef, *Heritage*, about the son of two world-famous parents; the mother does not come off well. For twenty-nine years, West successfully blocked the novel's publication. In 1984, when the novel was finally released, the child, aged sixty-nine, wrote an introduction to the book that further condemned his mother. The same year, the child published a laudatory biography of his father.

Shirley Jackson: Four children.

J. G. Ballard: Widowed with three young children. Drank every day, was very productive, and called all of his children, in his autobiography of the same name, "miracles of life." In describing seeing his children newly born, he wrote, "Far from being young, as young as a human being can be, they seemed immensely old, their foreheads and features streamlined by time, as archaic and smooth as the heads of pharaohs in Egyptian sculpture, as if they had travelled an immense distance to find their parents. Then, in a second, they became young." Ballard also wrote with fondness about his time as a child in the internment camps of Shanghai.



Left: *Hortense Nursing Paul*, by Paul Cézanne © Sotheby's/akg-images  
Right: *First Steps*, After Millet, by Vincent van Gogh © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City/Art Resource, New York City





# CURLING PARENTS AND LITTLE EMPERORS

By Pamela Druckerman

Soon after my book *Bringing Up Bébé* appeared, in 2012, I discovered an animated video made by a company in Taiwan. In it, a woman who's supposed to be me drinks red wine and teaches her child to paint the *Mona Lisa*. Then she has a street fight with a "tiger mom" (presumably Amy Chua) who turns into an actual tiger just before "I" stab her with a French flag.

This video was the first hint that my book would find readers beyond the American and British audiences I'd expected. *Bringing Up Bébé* has since been translated into twenty-three languages; Estonian is next. (Editors of the Slovak translation changed my last name to Drucker-manová.) The book compares the child-rearing practices of middle-class parents in France and the United States. The latter is an anxious, labor-intensive, child-centric style of parenting—sometimes called hyperparenting or the kindergarchy—that has taken hold in the past twenty years. Today, college-educated American mothers spend nine more hours per week on child care than they did in the mid-1990s. They spend much of

this additional time chauffeuring kids to and from activities.

As messages arrived from readers around the world, I realized that we Anglophones aren't the only ones hyperparenting. Middle-class Brazilians, Russians, Germans, Czechs, and Poles are doing it, too. Scandinavians told me about "curling parents": in the sport of curling, athletes continuously scrub a sheet of ice so that a stone can glide smoothly across it. Chinese readers described their "little emperors." France, where I'd landed almost by accident, turned out to be an exception. (The economists Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti have argued that rising inequality has led to intensive parenting around the world, because parents believe their kids need more skills than ever to succeed. France, they write, is the "main outlier" from this pattern.)

Some American reactions to my book reflected our unique relationship with the French. "What is your response to those who may say that your book pushes a socialist agenda, encourages parents to stifle creativity, and that the French parenting style results in

alienation of affection for children?" a journalist from a regional parenting magazine asked me. (She was referring to a *Forbes* article about my book headlined BRINGING UP BÉBÉ? NO THANKS. I'D RATHER RAISE A BILLIONAIRE.)

Americans were among the most reluctant to admit that they were hyperparenting, or that they could be classified at all. One journalist insisted that every family in her neighborhood followed a different parenting philosophy. (The impulse to handcraft your child-rearing methods is a hallmark of America's upper-middle classes.) At the same time, some readers tried to turn me into a parenting guru. A TV station in Portland, Oregon, ran a story about a mother who'd imposed French practices on her children, complete with forbiddingly gourmet meals. A woman from Chicago asked, "If we follow your parenting philosophy, do we have to do everything, or can we pick and choose?"

Russian readers also thought I was trying to launch a movement. "You are an active adherent of French parenting system and you promote it all over the world," one journalist wrote. "Was your activity somehow noticed by the French government? Maybe you are already honored with some French reward?"

When I visited Moscow to promote the book, Russian mothers told me that they felt overly invested in their kids. But they worried that, if they weren't sufficiently doting, their children wouldn't take care of them when they got old. (Russians apparently think it's cruel to put relatives in retirement homes.)

Swedish readers seemed to view French parenting entirely through the lens of spanking. Sweden was the first country to ban corporal punishment of children, in 1979, which is a matter of national pride. How could I admire the parenting in a country in which the practice continued?

Spanking is legal in France, as it is in the United States. But practically all French parenting experts now oppose it, arguing that it's degrading and pointless, and gives parents the wrong kind of authority. I tried to assure apoplectic Swedes that I personally oppose spanking and that I wouldn't have written about French parenting if I thought French kids were being beaten into submission. I doubt that I convinced a single one of them.





Readers of the book's Brazilian edition, *Crianças francesas não fazem manha* (roughly: "French Children Don't Make a Fuss"), were especially taken by the way that French mothers feel entitled to get their lives and figures back, and to take time for themselves. More than readers anywhere else, Brazilians urgently wanted to know what I thought of them. Did I know any Brazilian children? How were they different? Did Brazilian parents encourage obesity by being too indulgent? Were they too affectionate? "It is said that our children throw more tantrums than the British children," one journalist asked. "Is that actually true?"

Foreign publishers sometimes wanted to make small changes to the book. But my Japanese publisher was the only one who asked to cut an entire chapter: the one on having infant twins. "The twins section was regarded by everyone as being particular to people with or interested in twins," was how a local literary agent explained it.

Japanese journalists were fascinated by the French child-care system. In Japan, "many mothers end up giving up continuing to work because day-care centers in their area are completely full," one wrote to me. Partly because of this, Japan has one of the world's lowest birthrates. France, where many mothers work, has one of the highest in Europe.

"In Japan there is a 'Mom caste,' or a hierarchy among mothers whose children go to the same kindergarten," the

same journalist added. "There is a boss in a mom's group and bossism exists. Pressure for conformity, insidious bullying, and competition are headaches for the mothers."

After the French translation of *Bringing Up Bébé* came out (they called it *Bébé Made in France*), I spent a month appearing on French TV and radio shows, and sitting for print interviews. After a decade of living anonymously in Paris, I was briefly ubiquitous.

The French were tempted not to take me seriously. They're suspicious of praise,

and reasoned that there must be something wrong with anyone who admired French parenting. This is a country, after all, where scoring fourteen out of twenty on a school test is usually considered excellent. When kids do too well, their parents complain that the class was too easy.

Elisabeth Badinter, who has written extensively on feminism and motherhood, wrote in a preface to the French edition that I'd observed Parisians "with all the distance of Lévi-Strauss studying the Bororo of Brazil." The French weren't always thrilled to be summed up by an American. Some interviewers insisted that parenting habits—like practically everything else in France—were in decline. A well-heeled columnist said that, while my description was true of her, it might not extend to less elite French mothers.

I was surprised by how few French commentators had actually read the book. Some ridiculed my supposed belief that French mothers (or children) are perfect and that the French are the world's best parents. Eventually, I began every interview by explaining that I'd made no such claims, and that my

assessment of French parenting was fairly modest.

Ordinary French readers were more generous. Many said they'd recognized themselves—or at least their aspirational selves—in my descriptions. One woman told me that she'd bought the book for her brother, so that he could become "more French."

Indeed, for the most part the book merely relays the conventional wisdom of the French middle class: not what everyone always does but what they often do. A glossy women's magazine decided to do a "Oui-Non" article, with my perspective countered by a French expert. An editor at the magazine called me in a panic when she couldn't find anyone to defend the "Non" side. She finally settled for a psychologist whom I'd quoted extensively in the book. For the photo, they posed us back-to-back on a child's bed. The headline asked, ARE FRENCH KIDS PERFECT?

No one's aiming for perfection, of course. My kids can't paint their own toenails, let alone the *Mona Lisa*. But I think hyperparents everywhere would be glad to recover their nine lost hours per week. For now, at least, France seems to be where they're most likely to find them.



Left: *Melanie and Me Swimming*, by Michael Andrews © The artist/Tate, London/Art Resource, New York City. Right: *Woman with a Child Descending a Staircase*, by Rembrandt van Rijn © The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City/Art Resource, New York City



# SELF-PORTRAIT WITH DAUGHTERS

By A. Balkan

**I**t was summer and I was a new father, to eight-month-old daughters. I was the pilot of a car trip: New York City to somewhere near Lake Michigan—a town called Watervliet (half-rhymes with Wounded Knee) and a lake called Paw Paw.

But first we had to get there. Every second my daughters weren't sleeping, they were *cryin'*. That's what my girls used to call crying, although that summer they couldn't yet speak. They could only coo and cry; there was lots of crying, especially when we had to drive somewhere. The only thing that soothed them was Dylan's tune about the horses and how tired they are. It was the only song that they'd let me play without them going nuts and hollering. *All the tired horses in the sun, how'm I supposed to get any riding done?*

In Michigan we were to rendezvous with my in-laws at a lakeside house they'd rented for two weeks. There was a one-room cottage behind the house; my wife and I were told we could sleep there, and our daughters would sleep in their crib inside the main house. And when, in the wee hours, the girls needed changing or feeding, the in-laws would gladly volunteer. The idea was for my wife and me, but especially for my wife, to get some sleep for the first time in eight months.

The second morning in the cute little cottage, there was a tornado. No one knew it was coming, so no one knew to take cover. I was brushing my teeth, and my wife was in the main house already.

The tornado ripped a tree out of the ground and dropped it on the roof. Our cute cottage, destroyed. No one was hurt, but the power was knocked out for the entire lakeside town. So my wife took the kids to her parents' house in not too far-away Mishawaka, Indiana, and I stayed there, at the lake, waiting for power.

It took a while for the power to come back. For four days, I read my book in the hammock out back, by the destroyed cottage, and when I got tired of the hammock, I paddled the kayak out onto the empty lake.

I enjoyed reading my book while lying in the kayak on the lake. Very much, in fact. I liked to close my eyes behind my shades and nap.

**T**he speedboat never hit me. Not really. At the last possible splinter of a second, it swerved. It missed. Instead of hitting me head-on, as it had been on course to do, the boat clipped the nose of my kayak, dumping me into the lake. I remember being upside down, underwater, and thinking, *So this is what it's like to die.*

I did not die. I came up for air. I coughed up a bunch of mucky lake water. I remember that the water tasted like gasoline, but it was probably just the fumes coming from the boat's engine.

I also noticed that my right leg was sliced straight through the middle of my calf. It must've made contact with the speedboat's propeller when I was rolling out of my kayak and into the water. I screamed, Oh my God! I screamed, Holy fuck! Actually, I don't remember what I screamed. My leg was still attached to me, but barely. It was hanging from just below my knee by a little bit of bone, some shredded muscle, and some skin. I held my freshly severed leg by my ankle and kicked with my other foot to stay afloat. I tried to hold it level, my limb. I tried to hold it steady. It must've been the shock, and the bath of adrenaline that my body was, at that moment, awash in, but the pain, at least initially, wasn't all that bad. It simply felt like I was being stung by a few hundred thousand wasps at the same time in the same spot. I gripped my shredded limb with one arm and dog-paddled with the other back to my kayak. When I reached it, I flipped it over and threw myself on top, and I waited.

## A DOCTOR'S WORDS:

Near-amputation of the right leg with open tibial/fibular fracture. Patient has a more than 4 cm segmental loss of the fibula, anterolateral and posterior com-

partment soft tissue injuries which were very extensive.

The tibial nerve is intact as is the anterior tibial artery and vein. The remainder of the limb save for a small skin-bridge is not.

## A WIFE'S WORDS (TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS):

A's foot is still down there, swollen and yellow. Yellow from the cleaning solution they douse it in before surgery, which he had today, and which went fine, except for they removed a whole hell of a lot of dead muscle. The muscle dies because it is being serviced by only one artery, instead of three, like the edges of a lawn might brown if you had just one hose watering the center.

Today we had surgery to flush the wound, get out bits of stray bone, and set up a medical erector set around the lower half of A's lower right leg below the knee. Both leg bones down there are shattered, and a big chunk of muscle and nerves and skin are no more.

In the best scenario we keep the foot and we have 6–12 months of surgery (plastic and reconstructive), and some kind of walking assistance (cane?) for ever and ever. I'll have to find out more on that tomorrow.

A. misses his girls, bemoans never skating again, and wants a Gatorade.

## WORDS OF THE RESPONDING OFFICER:

Suspect, R, stated that he had just put the boat in the water. Had been on the water for just a few minutes. R had launched the boat at the public launch. R stated that when he went to launch the boat, it would not start and he used a jump-pack to start the vessel. It should be noted that the battery of the vessel is located in the rear (stern) portion of the vessel on the starboard side. In order to access this battery, the seat cushions need to be removed, then the battery pack can be placed underneath. R stated that he had just launched and was traveling around the lake in a direction that would be counterclockwise. R stated that when he made it to the other side of the lake, he noticed with his peripheral vision that the boat cushions that had been removed from behind the driver's side of the vessel to the passenger (port) side, and were stacked, had begun bouncing as if they might be bounced out of the boat. R's description would indicate that he diverted his attention to the boat cushions and had begun to reach for them so they would not fly out of the vessel. R stated he hit something in the water. R stated he never saw what



he hit. R stated that after having hit something in the water, the vessel ceased running. R stated he heard a loud male's scream.

A nurse came in around five in the morning. She handed me a clipboard stacked with triplicates—yellow, pink, and ash. You need to sign these forms, she said.

When I was a kid, I'd swipe credit-card triplicate forms from restaurants and department stores. Magic paper is what I called it. I didn't even color or write on it, just kept drawers full of it.

"What am I signing?" I asked.

"The forms say you agree to undergo the baloney amputation," she said.

"Baloney amputation?" I asked.

"Yessir. It's printed right there on the form."

"'Bologna' like the processed meat?" I asked.

"I'm sorry!" she said.

It took me a few beats to find the words on the paper.

"Oh, 'below-knee!'" I said, pointing to the proper words, **BELOW-KNEE AMPUTATION**, in bold on the top page of the top form. "That sure makes more sense than 'bologna,'" I said.

"That's what I said, 'below-knee,'" she said.

"Yeah, but I misheard you. For some reason I thought you said 'bologna,' like bologna-sandwich bologna."

I don't remember her exact reaction to this conversation, only that she got embarrassed and looked some other direction.

AN EMAIL FROM MY MOTHER-IN-LAW,  
WRITING ON BEHALF OF MY EIGHT-  
MONTH-OLD TWINS:

Hi, Daddio!

We love you! We are having a good time at Grandma Mary's and Grandpa Jimmy's but we miss you. Last night we slept from 7:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M., and they seemed to think it was some really big deal, but as you know it's just what we usually do. Right now we're crawling around in the living room. The blue carpet is soft but we get stuff stuck between our toes.

Grandma Mary is nice, but she is a slow diaper-er.

Today we are going to rearrange some furniture so we have more room to wander.

We'll keep writing to let you know what's up in our world. It's going to be hot today so stay cool!

xoxoxo,  
G & J

I wish I remembered it better—the day my wife brought my daughters to visit. It was only a couple days after the last of my surgeries, the so-called guillotine surgery, where they sawed the fucker off once and for all. Ever since then, I'd been pumping myself full of painkillers night and day. I was pretty out of it.

My old man was with us that day. I remember he was quite nervous. I think he was worried that something or someone would bump or knock against my leg and cause it to be—I don't know—more fucked than it was already?

We took the elevator to the cafeteria, sat at communal tables. We fed my twin girls. We fed them in the cafeteria in the portable high chairs that my wife had hauled all the way from New York. I don't know why, out of the dimness of that day, it's my father and his nervousness that sparkles. Once, when I was feeding my kids, instead of putting the spoonful of squash or peas or corn or whatever it was into my daughter's mouth, I put it in my own. I swallowed the bite and I smiled at my dad. He did not smile back. So I took another bite, and instead of merely smiling, I rubbed my belly and grinned, a demonstrably gleeful grin announcing that the slop I'd just swallowed was, in fact, the slop of the sublime.

Later that evening, my dad and I ordered Chinese. But they delivered the food to the wrong wing. By the time the orange chicken found us, it was sour and congealed, not to mention cold. Then we walked. Or, rather, he walked while pushing me around in a wheelchair. We rambled. We strolled. For a while we were out in the sun, but the wheelchair was a piece of shit; it kept getting stuck on cracks in the sidewalk. So we went back inside. We journeyed over to the pediatric wing. We hit up the gift shop. We gazed at the bizarre-as-fuck collection of paintings that had been donated by the family of some dead hospital administrator. We discussed Roth and whether *The Plot Against America* or *American*

*Pastoral* was the superior American nightmare. We recited lines from *The Big Lebowski*. We did that often, my dad and I, during those two weeks of my care in the chopped-limb wing—the strolling. Sometimes we strolled in the late morning, almost always in the evening. You could say that our appetite for strolling those hospital grounds could not be fully sated.

A LETTER FROM MY FATHER:

Still looking for literary quotes that will properly represent your situation. This came to mind:

NIHILIST: We believe in nothing, Lebowski. Nothing! And tomorrow we come back and cut off your chonson.

LEBOWSKI: Excuse me?

NIHILIST [shouting]: We'll cut off your johnson!

NIHILIST #2: Just think about that, Lebowski.

NIHILIST: Yeah, your wiggly penis, Lebowski.

NIHILIST #3: Yeah, and maybe we stomp on it and squoosh it, Lebowski.

A WINTERTIME CONVERSATION WITH  
A FRIEND'S SIX-YEAR-OLD KID:

KID: Where'd you get your metal leg?

ME: Fulton Mall.

KID: Fulton Mall in Brooklyn?

ME: No doubt.

FRIEND TO ME: Really?

ME TO FRIEND: Yeah, sorta. That's where my prosthetist's office is.

ME TO KID: I get my sneakers there too.

KID: So you buy your legs and your shoes at Fulton Mall?

ME: It is true.

It was summer, nearly three years on. I was making bracelets with my kids. We were sliding colored plastic beads onto pipe cleaners that came exclusively in a hideous shade of radioactive lime green.

They were asking about *The Boat*; they wanted to know where they were at the time. "You were back at the house with Mommy," I told them, which was true, they were. Safe as safe could be.

But then G put two and two together. "You were all by yourself?" she asked. She spoke in this tender rasp, a little amplified mouse.

"Yeah," I said. "I was out there by myself."



"But why?" asked J.

"I was taking a break from helping Mommy. I wanted to relax in my kayak and read my book. I wanted to be alone."

That's when G broke in with strict instructions: "Daddy, you can't put your leg outside the boat."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah."

J climbed onto my lap. "What are you making?" she asked.

"I'm making a bracelet for your sister, do you want me to make you one?"

I sorted through another handful of beads and tried not to think too much about the lake, and the quiet before the boat.

## PART NEITHER, PART BOTH

By Michelle Tea

**T**he hospital room in which I recovered from my caesarean section was as cold and ugly as any hospital room anywhere, but because it was high on a hill in San Francisco the view was magnificent. For four morphined days, the shifting sky outside seemed alive, in cahoots with us, saluting our success with its ribbons of clouds and confetti of stars.

Us was me, who had lost a lot of blood, not enough for transfusion but enough to keep me under observation should one become necessary. Nurses would come with pills, would press the place I'd been

cut and watch the incision for seepage. It hurt. Can you tell me before you press it? I learned to ask. Us was my son, tiny-headed, the upside-down baby, lips ruby like a fairy-tale enchantment. My wife had brought him to me—my arms outstretched, blue tarp bumping my nose—as I lay there vomiting down the side of my face. *What thing, what thing from what fairy tale was so ruby?* I wondered in a drugged haze. Say something to him, my wife urged, because she wanted him to know my voice. But what do you say to a baby? Hi, I said. Hi, baby.

Us was also her, my wife, that prince. Eight months pregnant I told an old woman sitting beside me on the bus that the egg that hatched my baby came from my wife's ovaries. I didn't know how the old woman would take it; one can never know. She was delighted: That's like a fairy tale! My wife is younger than me, and her eggs were nicer and more plentiful. Once the fertility doctor learned of her existence he wanted nothing to do with my eggs. Which was fine with me. It *was* like a fairy tale, having a woman's baby, although my wife is the kind of woman who in a fairy tale would pass as a boy, would be unmasked as female only after completing some daring feat or besting a fleet of men—by impregnating another woman, perhaps.

With the raw mystery of birth still so close, and all my lost blood, and the morphine, I could feel the truth of death with a starkness and surety I'd never before known. Love, too. I'd heard of this mythic love mothers have for their children; I'd worried I wouldn't feel it. In the hospital room it throttled me, a seizure of love not only for my son but for my wife too—a new level of love, or perhaps a new love entirely, something born with my son, which felt almost painful to hold. In our little room, tended to by countless nurses, we were safe from death but would not be safe forever. Our oneness was so total it ruined language, but we would not be one forever. My mind reeled.

My hormones, a tangle of chemicals that had kept my moods plummy during pregnancy, tapered. I felt like an elevator with cut cables, picking up brutal speed as I plummeted. If you think you have a personality, a soul, if you think there is anything particularly real about "you," try having a baby and watching your hormones retreat to prepregnancy levels. You are nothing but trembling and dread and tears. On top of this was the physical trauma and the terror it brought my wife, the sleep deprivation and drugs, and the wonder of our son's little body, our marvel at the instinct that drew him to my nipple and the magical way he commanded the milk to come. It seemed that time had stopped. Even the sky outside the window, which changed with the weather and the hours, resembled a screen saver. I wanted to stay inside that ugly little room forever.







We lived there for four days and four nights. I slept on a bed that I operated with buttons, my wife beside me on a cracked plastic chair that the hospital called a bed, as if we would be deceived. It didn't matter. She was close by, and the baby slept in her arms. Never did we lay him in the bassinet, an institutional plastic box; that was only for changing diapers and wheeling him over for check-ups in the nursery. Each one of those nights bled into strange, hazy days; the baby slept in my wife's arms.

I go by Mama, and my wife goes by Baba, a name adapted for a new kind of parent—part mother, part father, part neither, part both—and increasingly adopted by American women who can't relate to the binary genders lodged in Mom and Dad. Watching my wife become a baba I keep my love to myself, because if I try to express it I burst into tears. It overwhelms me completely—and. And the language is a bust. This feeling does not fit inside *I love you*; even *I love you SO MUCH*, delivered intensely and with serious eye contact, doesn't do it. And, anyway, this is a love that's got death on its tail. To speak of it will attract the attention of some vengeful deity that I didn't believe in until right now.

For the three weeks of her allotted parental leave plus the extra week of federal family leave, my wife changed our son's every diaper. She brought me nipple cream and pale-pink pads to slip into the cups of awful, industrial nurs-

ing bras the color of Band-Aids. She brought me plates of cut fruit and giant glasses of water clacking with ice. She wouldn't put the baby down until he began to bleat with hunger. After he'd fallen asleep with his mouth on me, I would hand him back. Friends watched us—family, too. A well-oiled machine, one said. A dance. A grandmother grew unexpectedly sad at the sight of us, which brought the sudden revelation of how little help she'd had with her own babies. It could have been so much easier, she said. My mother tells a family story I've never heard before, and I'm shocked that I haven't yet heard them all: the day I came home from the hospital, my father, angry that his own father seemed not to give a fig that this birth had occurred, violently

opened a box with a knife, stabbing it. My maternal grandmother—the daughter of a violent man, a wife- and child-beater—grew pale at this and quickly left the house. *Poor Nana*, I thought. Also: *My father loved me when I was born. My father was hurt by his father.* But of course he was. Where else do fathers learn to be hurtful? I think of our fatherless son. There exists a very generous drag queen whom we will someday point at and say, Him, he helped us make you.

Boys need to get dirty, the man across the street keeps telling my wife when she passes him standing by, stoned, as his own son plays in a pile of dirt. *Kids need to get dirty*, I fume. Is he telling her this because we're women, two women with a son? To be different within a culture is to constantly swat away paranoia. When he gets older I'll teach him how to throw a ball around, a male acquaintance offers, believing himself helpful. I know how to throw a ball, my wife says, confused. Well, not confused. We see the culture, and we see it seeing us. I see my wife hold our son in the tub, the pink of their skins; I see her pluck the cradle cap from his scalp, see her sing down into his upturned face, his ruby-red lips. My hormones have leveled, but it can still be too much. *What have I done to be this lucky?* I press my eyes closed until my chest loosens. At night the baby kicks his legs up and down, up and down, and we both think of a whale kicking his tail against the water. We bring him into the bed with us, and only then does he settle down, falling asleep with his little feet warm on my thigh, his fingers wrapped around our own.





# THE DONOR

By Emma Donoghue

He's been a central character in the story for as long as Chris and I have been telling it to the kids.

"We had Emma's egg but we didn't have a sperm to put with it. So we went to the doctor, and he said, 'Hey, I know a nice man called a donor who'll give you some sperm.'"

"A nice man called Adona?"

"No, a donor."

"A doughnut?"

"No, a donor, it means a giver. We've never met him, we don't know his name."

The kids (eleven and eight these days) haven't asked much about this mystery man over the years. Recently Chris and I dug the twelve-year-old file out of the cabinet and read them the details: the shape of his earlobes, what one of his grandmothers died of, his favorite book.

Most of his grandparents were still alive and well at the time the file was put together, of course, because nobody's accepted as a donor unless he's what farmers call excellent stock. The donors listed on the sperm bank's website sounded like radiantly healthy humans from the future; with ideal physical and mental traits and numbers for names (WX498! JB237!). It seemed the Donoghue genes were going to be the only dodgy ones. Nearsightedness, canker sores, absentmindedness, childhood constipation; height and loquacity were the only potentially useful ingredients I was sprinkling into the mix.

Ingredients: I notice I've slid from agricultural metaphors to culinary ones. It's almost impossible to discuss the procurement of human gametes without sounding cold-blooded or flippant. But choosing a donor was like nothing so much as shopping in a gourmet market, with prices to match. One site charged extra for their Premium Collection of sperm from men with Ph.D.'s. Chris and I both have Ph.D.'s, so we know what a feeble guarantee of intelligence they are. We rejected that site with hoots of mirth.

Choice is torture. Luckily, ours was narrowed down by several factors. To inseminate in our local fertility clinic, we needed sperm that was "Canadian-compliant." (Great phrase, and how Canadian! It just means that the sperm has been tested for certain diseases.) All Chris and I really cared about was finding an open-identity donor. That meant



a man willing to let the kids get his name and address and contact him after they turn eighteen—only if they want to, of course.

That left us with five Caucasian-like-us candidates, four of whom sounded like men I wouldn't shake hands with, let alone combine chromosomes. The fifth seemed lovely.

It was difficult to decide how many units of semen to buy because you don't know how many you'll need. We ordered three; any fewer seemed like tempting fate to strike us with fertility problems. But we were lucky, so lucky. Courtesy of the first shot we got our son; with the second, three years later, we got our daughter; last year we finally threw away the third, like a libation to the gods.

In order to take some of the mystery out of the man, I often bring up the subject of genetic inheritance with the kids. (They're much more interested in the other kind of inheritance: "Can I have your iPhone when you're dead?") They like to tease me; whenever they get praised for beauty or brains, they say, "That's probably from the donor," and cackle as I mime a stab wound to the heart.

Pause, while I pay our son a dollar to license for publication a joke of his own invention: "Why was my donor embarrassed? Because I have his genes!" (Jeans, get it?) We often hear our two explaining the gist of donor conception to kids they've just met, on beaches or at playgrounds, in countries such as France where our family structure causes confusion. No, you don't actually need a dad, they say, you just need a sperm to put with the egg.

When I think about our donor, I don't feel either cold-blooded or flippant. I feel grateful; vaguely, but deeply. I hope he's thriving. I bet when he thinks about the babies he gets a little glow. Since Chris and I saw *The Kids Are All Right* it's been a running joke between us: If he turns out to be Mark Ruffalo, I'm the one who has an affair with him, okay? I do occasionally wonder if he's at all nervous at the prospect of 2021, when the first of dozens of curious eighteen-year-olds could come knocking on his door. (Little-known fact: the sperm banks "retire" a man once he's had a certain number of bio-kids.)

"One more thing," the nurse said to us. "Are you planning to tell the child?" The two of us burst out laughing. "Most of our clients are heterosexual couples, so we have to ask that," she said sheepishly. "Roughly half of them ignore our advice and keep it a secret."

I really hope that fraction has gone down, more than a decade on. I pray that this particular creation story—no more complicated than any other, really—gets passed on till it's banal, just part of what used to be called the birds and the bees. I hope the donors aren't embarrassed, and the mothers aren't embarrassed, and the kids aren't embarrassed. None of us should be; we're all sharing the jeans.



# UNTITLED (TRIPTYCH)

By Ben Lerner

It might be necessary to work backward from tool marks and defects in the material on which the sky is painted, inspect the hinges joining the sky's three panels, yet it might also be necessary to work forward, protecting what doesn't exist from decay, light effect by light effect. The placard says perspective is reinvented in this picture, those angels represent a revolution in the depiction of angels, but the halos don't occupy real space, all they ever wanted, I mean the sinners on whom God has rained, rains fire. A conservator should be prepared to work in rain or otherwise inclement conditions, to work within an institution, local at first, then distant, like his love, if we're going to revolt against conventions governing how donors are depicted beside angels, who mark the historical transitions. The placard says things about provenance I can't follow, but "bequest" reminds me, I've been meaning to bequeath an innovation, a small innovation in a minor tradition like this one, maybe the way I'm handling portions of the right edge, where old light streamed, is streaming. I'm here awaiting test results, but know I don't get service in medieval wings, as if the paintings stopped time, all they wanted from their medium, even or especially when the medium was time, as in music. Do you know music? Composed and performed for many purposes, popular all over the world, in the past it was religious, and, while I didn't know it then, I heard some, hear it, whereas most people alive today have only seen it. Here I am mitering two dreams: the dream of the poem, then the dream of the poem of that dream, the one you write on waking, publish in *Lana Turner* or *The Paris Review*, but you can't really join them, the dreams I mean, not without their collapsing into prose, so you write two novels, waiting for results it might be necessary to work back from. If I got service I could hear from an office of one sort or another, the way Rilke heard from the torso of Apollo, only this time it's a headless body with a bored voice and you've returned to the Met to hide from experience. On the backs of paintings signs of experience are visible, conservators date eternities. It's an everyday thing, if you're a conservator, to restore a revelation attributed to a disciple, then return it to storage:

the basements are full of virgins alarmed by a sudden vision, as if Gabriel had brought test results. And he has: you're pregnant. But I'm a virgin! But I'm a boy! I don't exist! Doesn't matter: they can work forward, they can depict your crucifixion on the right while on the left you're about to be born, neither you nor anybody else within the painting can know, unless you're painted by a master because a master can suggest knowledge in a halo. You can't see your own halo, it hails from the future, scary to realize you're looking out from a painting, that you'll crack if you blink and yet I'm afraid that's why I'm calling.

A lot of theoretical issues surround conserving work made out of organic substances: fat, vegetable matter, blood and feces, dust, toenail parings, chocolate, and the true form of a work might be to flake, rot, or otherwise register time, the way I accidentally praised passages of water damage when I visited a studio after Sandy or the dream I had about being in the room when the plug was pulled on Oldenburg's *Ice Bag-Scale C*, a kinetic sculpture difficult to restore but easy to replicate, a mode of destruction. The time is coming when the doctor enters the room and says we can't restore you, but here's a pamphlet explaining replication and its pricing, or that time has passed, I haven't kept up since Lucía was born, and now we are expecting another, not another Lucía, another girl, the due date is late June, a scheduled C for a number of reasons Ari wouldn't want me to put in a poem even though she knows that poems are great places to make information disappear, dissolve. Should it bother me that Schedule C is the name of a tax form on which you list income and expenses related to your self-employment and is used by sole proprietors, which I am, at least since I wrote novels, write them? Of course it should: a curtain divides her while they work, I can't not think of how magicians—men—saw women in half and yet conserve them. A fine line, only minimal scarring, between restoring an everyday object and making a new one, and now many artists are designing works they require future technology to realize, like 4-D printers, so what's conserved is virtual:



that's how I think of both poems and novels, the main difference is in deductions, how and how much you withhold from the actual and for how long. Is Oldenburg dead? Google says no, he's eighty-six at the time of writing, but you should probably check at the time of reading, because whether we should involve the artist, consult his intentions, is just one of the issues surrounding work that takes up space and/or exists in time, subject to taxation. I don't get service in Mt. Sinai, I remember from Lucía's birth, I'll have to step back into the world to post or receive results, funny how you can't get calls from the institution when you're in it. Here is a pamphlet about cord-blood banking: I can't follow what it says about provenance.

The artist desired a medium that could bind colored particles to themselves and the support without suppressing vibrancy as they dried, a version of the oldest desire: to arrive at identity through dissolution, absinthe poured over sugar. It could have worked for a while, but the problem is that blue, of all the colors, is the most historical: a blue can change its meaning in an hour lasting years, my definition of an epoch, not that I'll be consulted about our own transition. Those suggestive shadows we admired for centuries turned out to be a consequence of candle smoke and glue varnish, so said the restorers who developed aggressive solvents used to remove what they supposed were alien substances. Now we're told the new tonal modeling destroyed the sculptural effects we had been right to feel dissolved by in the first place: an expansive fold of drapery that hangs from the lower left leg no longer sweeps down gracefully from below the knee, emerging abruptly at the shin instead, a minor crime, but against humanity. A blue that changed patterns of thinking if not patterns of thought, for a generation of religious scholars has obtained, is obtaining over Brooklyn as I write this, the first poem that mentions my daughter by name, unless it becomes a novel. If it does, rinse away the efflorescent salts to reveal a poem of inaccurate vividness I've composed without my knowledge the way some people sleep-drive on Ambien, America's number-one-prescribed hypnotic. The blue of pills, the blue of links, the two blue lines that indicate you're pregnant, lapis lazuli mined in Afghanistan then crushed to depict a donor's garment: none of these would have appeared as blue to the ancients, who couldn't see the color,

or so says a team of researchers at MIT as you've probably read on the Internet. If that's true, we can't restore ancient art without delicate optical surgeries insurance won't cover, which means only the wealthy will be able to afford classical blindness. We could manage for Lucía, but not for two kids, at least not in Brooklyn, unless I move toward genre fiction: strange to think the future of the past depends on vampire sagas, soft porn, First World problems, false spring poems about death and taxes. Better to be replicated than restored from the wrong settings, world, or period, but it's best to be printed layer by layer in a granular bed, sintered by laser, or left unrealized. Where were you when you realized the white marble statues had once been painted garish colors, that the Parthenon looked like a miniature-golf course in Topeka? I was in the Roman Sculpture Court, avoiding results among enucleated heroes, furies a few hours ago, and thought I would have preferred to have heard that news from a poem, not an audio guide or placard. Somebody should inform the eighteenth century they are basing their revival on projected shadows, just as someone should tell Homer the sea is a color between violet and green we could restore to his sight with lasers. The problem is how to deliver the news in a form that dissolves it into feeling





faces can be imbued with, and for conservation purposes, the sky is the face of a period.

Today I agreed to donate all my organs except heart valves, although it's corneas I'd like to pass on to the future, not because I'm so great at focusing or refracting light, but just because I'd like to be the medium waves enter en route to sentiment, plus a donor poses an interesting formal challenge since the painter must depict him both beside the angel and a world apart, their bodies subject to different laws, although the word "angel" can mean donor now, confusing exchangeability with translucence. At first they were depicted on a smaller scale than principal figures, compromising linear perspective, so eventually they were integrated into the scene but not allowed to touch anything, although a Madonna might glance down benevolently at a banker kneeling forever in the foreground. Forever is not eternity: forever takes place in time, whereas eternity transforms large domes into upwardly spiraling vortices of clouds, dissolving the ceiling, restoring it to God who sees the future like we see the past: painted, which must be confusing since THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL, as the poster says at the DMV, where I don't get service, A FUTURE WITHOUT LINES. According to Wikipedia, before the fifteenth century a physical likeness may not have been attempted or achieved, only later were the donors portrayed carefully, as historical persons instead of as whatever the opposite of a historical person is, an angel? Homer? "Daughters in particular appear as standardized beauties in the style of the day," says no one in particular on a page anyone can edit or restore. She has my eyes. We didn't name her for the patron saint

of the blind whose remains were stolen from Syracuse, part of why they commissioned Caravaggio, who'd just escaped from prison, to depict her burial, we named her for light itself, though neither names nor light behaves that way in time. You can exchange, the commission implies, bodies and paintings, doing time for depicting it, suspend sentences across lines, but you can't control donations, your tissues could end up supporting a face you don't believe in. People can get paid to give sperm or eggs, blood or plasma, but it's illegal to sell organs, otherwise the rich would commission the unincarcerated poor, whereas now the rich will commission anyone, even servants, disciples, assistants, who are often tasked with underpainting sky, rarely charged with depicting impregnation through actual light or the virtual music we can't play in time, its instruments still to be invented, and yet you still hear it "in the future as in the past," a stillness streaming live across margins, media. Too late to restore it and too early, but it's always being conserved imperfectly for the future in a poem read forward and backward at once

inaudibly. An X-ray will discover a hidden portrait or overturn an attribution in my body, or the radiograph will reveal no pentimenti, which would suggest I am a copy, either way I'm calling now from outside the institutions, broken speakers beneath a weeping cherry just off Flatbush, the cardinal's string of down-slurred whistles, hammering in the middle distance, police choppers. That they can hover above the open-air performance, but can't enter the invisible





theater, indicates that spring is a massive rally against the law, the actual play beside the point, the actors mainly kids from the neighborhood, tinsel-wrapped pipe-cleaner halos. The youngest players keep wandering back into history where, swooped up by a guardian, they are restored to the chorus, then wander off again: I've read the polemics against the figure of the child, agree the available futures they are made to represent must be dissolved, agree it's not even my place to agree, I largely belong to the order marked for destruction when the revolution in perspective is achieved, but the love I work within is not genetic, even if organic substances are used, the smell of micro-flora blooming in the soil when it's turned, is turning. Spring is a massive rally creeping backward into the year, so it gets later early now, rally against the test results and recommended measures, serial echoes, periodic scans. Its parapet exists to connect the fictive world of the sacred with the temporal one in which we view it, more effective is how the bottom edge of spring is burned in places: do you sense how the artist worked from photographs untaken at the time, that affect here awaits

experience in form, like color in a color word, or like a given name you less grow into than are trained around? Yes and no, forward and back, chain-link fence with wine-dark blossoms I have to keep Lucía from eating, no, they're fine to eat, just googled it. My sorrowful expression reveals no foreknowledge, let alone about what's happening in a panel to my left, the viewer's right, "he's just a donor," like everybody else, my features general as money when at rest. It's raining now it isn't, or it's raining in the near future perfect when the poem is finished or continuous, will have been completed when we figure out how rain can be depicted without a lens or window since all this takes place when glass was rare and rain was sometimes fire, although it's warm enough to let her play in for a while now it stopped. In the future there were tenses to express what it's like to be alive today so we won't need names, but for the present, even though the root is war, I like Marcela, Chela to her friends, and a friend of my daughters' is how I think of you, reading a poem you're on both sides of like a court painter during a historical transition, the restoration spring always almost is.

## ON BEING A STEPPARENT

*By Ellen Rosenbush*

**I**n my mid-forties, I married a man who had joint custody of two children, both boys, from a previous marriage. The boys, Jed and Jason, were nineteen and fifteen. Not having any children of my own, I didn't have a clue about parenting, much less stepparenting. In the early days, I didn't know how I was supposed to act around them, and they probably didn't know how to act around me. When my husband first told Jason that we were getting married, he asked me, "Do I have to call you Mommy, then?" I told him, "No, you have to call me Mommy Dearest." Humor helps.

When you come into an already formed family, the deck is stacked against you. You're not supposed to be there, and if you are it's usually because of some tragedy: a death or a divorce. I was afraid that the boys would compare me with their mother and find me terribly wanting. With my reggae collec-

tion, my CD player, and my insistence that we sign up for HBO, I was a hit with Jed from the minute I entered the house. But Jason was more anxious about the change. His mother lived nearby, and he told me that he was worried he would wake up one morning in the wrong house. "It wouldn't matter," I told him. Today he says he has no memory of this, but I do: it was the first time I felt like I was helping him.

As a stepparent, you have at least one advantage over your spouse: you can see the children as they are, without dredging up old problems or behaviors. This is both a curse and a blessing. It would have been wonderful to see the boys grow and change from infancy; but on the other hand, I could accept them and be less judgmental than their biological parents were. When, as a sophomore in college, Jason called me at work to tell me that he was thinking

about quitting school, I was able to react in a more measured way than his father or mother would have. I told him to come home for the weekend and we would discuss it, while carefully adding that staying in school seemed like the better plan. On another occasion, Jed got a traffic ticket and asked me what to do. I told him—I remember being in the basement laundry room—that he had two choices: I would pay the ticket and the matter would remain between us, or he could tell his father. He decided to be a grown-up and tell his father.

Though there were a few times I wondered what I had gotten myself into, I mostly felt that my role as a stepparent was a privileged one. I could be the boys' friend and confidant—not just a disciplinarian. They are now lovely, intelligent, good-humored young men with families of their own. I hope I had something to do with that.



# FEVER

By Karl Taro Greenfeld

My eleven-year-old daughter, Lola, is short for her age, wiry, and fast. Her body type and skill set are not ideally suited to basketball, yet this is the sport she has chosen. Last fall, I signed her up for a basketball league in Pacific Palisades, and a few days later I received an email from Nicole, the woman who administered the league, saying that they were in need of coaches. I volunteered. She told me to attend the player evaluations, to better prepare for the draft.

There was only one other coach at the evaluations: Stan, an older man with white hair and a Hawaiian shirt. He carried a white clipboard with a basketball court stenciled on it and did not acknowledge me. A dozen girls took turns shooting from the top of the key, the free-throw line, and the elbow. Then they dribbled down the center of the court in a serpentine between orange cones. I took careful notes about each girl's height and shooting ability. This was the first of two evaluations, though on the day of the second one, Coach Nicole called and said I didn't need to attend. I completed my draft form and emailed it to her. She sent back a team roster and I noticed that I had received a couple of the players I had requested.

At our first practice, I took stock of the Fever, as our team was called. We had Anna and Jessie, both of above-average height, and Freedom and Lori, who could both handle the ball.\* We also had Portia, Sara, Atoosa, and, of course, Lola. I spent a third of the practice trying to get the girls to stop arguing, texting, and posting to Instagram. Finally, I organized a few basketball-related activities: layup lines, defensive drills, and free-throw shots.

Our first game was against the Sky, which was headed by Coach Stan. None of the girls on his team had been at the evaluation I had attended, and most of them were taller than the Fever's tallest player.

\*Names have been changed because this is a story about eleven-year-olds.

We tipped off. Our team didn't put up a serious shot until about ten minutes into the game, by which point the other team was shooting uncontested layups and we were losing 22–0. Our opponents were not only taller, they also could score from fifteen feet or more. Our team didn't have a single player who could reliably hit an open jump shot, though we had plenty who would eagerly take and miss well-guarded twenty-five-footers.

By the start of the second half I was having a hard time persuading players on the bench to go back into the game. We ended up losing 55–9. Afterward, I shook Coach Stan's hand. He smirked and said, "Nice game, coach."

When Coach Nicole sent me the schedule for the rest of the season, I discovered that the league had only two teams. Every Sunday, the Fever would play the Sky, a team that, if the first week's game was indicative, was superior in every respect, including coaching.

According to *Coaching Basketball for Dummies*, "Coaching is about putting a smile on a youngster's face when she's on the court and seeing the excitement in her eyes as she has fun learning how to perform a variety of skills." But that pabulum wilts before the reality of getting demolished twelve Sundays in a row, not counting Thanksgiving weekend, by the same eight girls and their white-haired coach. We were the Washington Generals to their Harlem Globetrotters.

As our losses to the Sky mounted, I began to have dark thoughts about Coach Stan, who would loudly protest the occasional fouls called on his girls, even when they were winning by thirty points. Why did he bother? We never made our free throws.

I tried to figure out how to improve our offense. The *Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Basketball* was full of clever formations and plays. I tried a three-guard offense, an outside-in offense, screen and roll, give and go, none of which the girls could grasp or execute.

I even studied Phil Jackson's triangle offense, but I gave it up because I couldn't understand how it worked. And the reason no offensive set would work for us was simple: every play, every scheme, every formation was designed to end with a player putting the ball into the basket, and this was something we could not do.

I had the girls attempt a new defensive plan: we would keep our fastest players near the half-court line to stop the Sky's incessant and devastating fast break. But even if we slowed them down—and I can still picture those girls, blond-haired, gangly Clara; stocky, muscular Erika with the birthmark on her forehead; long, lean Katie with the awkward but effective shooting form—we were incapable of scoring enough to be competitive.

Girls began quitting. We lost Mara, among our best ball handlers, about halfway through the season. Her mother explained that she now had a dance class every Sunday. Atoosa, one of our two Persian players, simply stopped showing up; my emails to her mother started bouncing back.

I had the misfortune of coaching a losing youth-basketball team during the one season everybody thought there was a simple recipe for success. A few weeks after our first game, a new Malcolm Gladwell bestseller, *David and Goliath*, was published. In its opening chapter, a woefully undermanned girls-basketball team makes it all the way to the championship game using unconventional tactics. The coach, Vivek Ranadivé, was a first-generation Indian immigrant who had never played basketball; his team, a group of twelve-year-olds from Menlo Park, California, was short and untalented. Yet Coach Ranadivé had found a way to turn them into a true giant killer, a team of Davids.

Several parents had seen a segment on *60 Minutes* about Gladwell's book and mentioned it to me. When I looked into the story, I noticed that Coach Ranadivé had a surprising advantage. His two assistant coaches were Rometra Craig, a former Division I college-basketball player at Duke and USC, and her father, Roger Craig, a former All-Pro NFL running back. This plucky upstart coach had two elite athletes to help him. I didn't have any assistants, and none of the other parents were volunteering.





The strategy that Ranadivé and his assistants used to win games was to press during every opponent possession. They defended every inch of the court, from the moment their opponent in-bounded the ball. It's an exhausting and challenging strategy, and illegal in many youth leagues. In our league, we could only press during the second half, by which point we were usually behind by twenty. Gladwell's story fit the thesis of his book; it just didn't work in the reality of my league.

Yet every practice and game, another father or mother would thoughtfully mention to me that they had read or seen something that could help us turn things around.

I started reading the motivational tracts of famous coaches: John Wooden's *Pyramid of Success*, *The Essential Wooden*, and *The Wisdom of Wooden*; Pat Summitt's *Reach for the Summit*; Lou Holtz's *Winning Every Day*. They all stressed that the benefits of team sports transcended winning or losing, but that was easy for them to say: they were all champions. Losing coaches

don't get to publish how-to books. Holtz, a national-championship-winning football coach at Notre Dame, called one chapter "The Best Part of Getting Knocked Down Is Getting Back Up: Tackling Adversity," but a page earlier, he had urged readers, "Think about winning before you go to sleep and the moment you wake."

My emails to the other parents began to sound increasingly desperate as I described new strategies and plans that might finally defeat the evil Sky. "We had a great practice yesterday," began a typical email. "We have a plan for this Sunday," Coach Karl would say, before laying out his doomed vision.

According to a survey conducted by ESPN, 23 percent of parents believe that youth sports are putting a strain on their families. Perhaps this is because an astonishing 32 percent believe that their child has a good chance of winning a Division I athletic scholarship. Eleven percent believe that their child could be a professional athlete someday. I took some comfort knowing that other parents, at least some of them, cared as

deeply as I did. But why? What was actually at stake? Nothing.

My daughter, it was obvious, was not going to play basketball at a high level, or perhaps even for another season, given the experience she was having. As a dad, I had previously taken my daughter's athletic endeavors lightly, rooting for her but not obsessing over wins and losses. But now that I was coaching, the metro-nomic regularity of the beatings my team was taking wore me down so much that I became irritable around the house. My wife and my father both told me to quit.

Lola tolerated our long season with equanimity. She accepted our circumstances, and when her teammates complained about our situation or lamented that we could never beat the Sky, she shrugged. She never contradicted my stated position that we would, eventually, somehow, find a way to win. But in the car on the way home from practice, she would ask me, "You don't really think we can win, do you?"

We did actually close the gap with the Sky, losing our last regular-



season game by just a dozen points. We finished the season 0–12, second place in a two-team league. Which meant that we would be playing in the championship game. Against the Sky.

In our final practice, I told my girls to forget scoring entirely, to forget offense. We were going to kill our opponents with a smothering defense. I told Lola, who was among the fastest girls in the league, to obsessively follow the Sky's point guard no matter where she was on the floor. Our only chance was to change the dynamics of the game (yes, sort of like Ranadivé's team did).

At the championship game, on a warm Sunday in December, my girls held the Sky to nine points during the first half. We went into halftime with a six-point lead, which prompted premature celebration from the girls, who couldn't help but discuss how good it would feel when they finally won a game.

"I'm going to laugh in their faces," Lori promised.

The Sky regained their shooting form in the second half, with Clara burying fifteen-footers and Erika running the fast break. But we somehow matched them basket for basket. Our team's parents were jubilant.

Then, with about two minutes left, the Fever scored a basket and the points were mistakenly given to the Sky. Or so we believed. Mistakes like that are common in youth basketball, and usually parents or the coaches quickly correct them. But in this case, the mistake was allowed to stand: the scorer insisted the score was correct.

Down by two points, we got the ball with about twenty-five seconds left. We didn't get a good shot, the Sky rebounded the ball, and they dribbled out the clock. But if those two disputed points had been correctly awarded, we would have been up by two. We would have been champions.

My players were in tears. Almost all of them ran over to the scorer's table, insisting that we had been robbed. The scorer, an unkempt young man who ate chili dogs while he logged the game, showed them his book, which seemed to indicate that the score was correct. But what if he had simply logged the error and never fixed it?

Several of the girls approached Coach Nicole to complain. Nothing is more

moving than a tearful eleven-year-old who believes she has been cheated. Somehow, Coach Nicole was unmoved.

"Coach," Coach Nicole said to me, "can you tell your girls to get in line for the second-place-trophy presentation?"

"They really feel they've been cheated out of the win," I said. "I mean, if you look at the season we've had, I mean, this really is tough if that's what happened."

"Hey, why do you have to be so negative?" Coach Nicole said. She turned to the team. "You guys played a great game. You should be proud."

"But we won," said Lori, "and you took it away."

"I can't stand this negativity," Coach Nicole said. She walked over to where the Sky were celebrating.

I couldn't persuade my girls to walk down the line and shake hands with the

Sky. I could barely shake Coach Stan's hand. Most of the girls left without their second-place trophies. Half were still crying. Parents emailed me into the next day, vowing to withdraw their children from the league.

I struggled to find a lesson we could draw from the experience.

We simply lost. And maybe that's the lesson, the most brutal of all. Sometimes you will lose, regularly, decisively, completely. And there will be nothing you can do about it.

The next month, I signed Lola up for spring basketball. We were assured there would be half a dozen teams because soccer season was now finished. A few days later, Coach Nicole emailed me and asked if I would coach again.

I told her I would do it.

## IN PRAISE OF BOREDOM

By Claire Messud

**T**he world into which I was born no longer exists, of course. I've been around for almost half a century, so it was inevitable. My parents—one French, raised largely in Algeria; the other Canadian, from Toronto—were born in the Depression and grew up during the Second World War, a time of uncertainty and restraint that marked them all their lives.

Although our household lacked for nothing, my parents wasted nothing. My mum taught us to repair moth holes in sweaters and to hem skirts; she meticulously ironed all our clothes, and also pillowcases, nightgowns, and knickers, not to mention my father's endless handkerchiefs. Our fridge was eternally a mess of tiny saucers of leftovers—half a lamb sausage, a tablespoon of *gratin dauphinois*, or some day-old marinated salad—carefully sealed with Saran Wrap. My mother washed out Ziploc bags for reuse, kept a jar of gnarled twist ties on the window ledge, and, under the sink, hoarded stacks of plastic supermarket tubs. You never knew when you might need them.

Ambitious and eager for the world, my parents pushed their children toward academic endeavor and, they hoped, to openness and curiosity, which, at least in my mother's case, had differentiated her from her parents. When she announced to her petit bourgeois Torontonians mum and dad that she intended to marry my French father, whom she'd met while studying in England, my maternal grandparents wrote a letter to their French counterparts expressing skepticism about the union: they spoke of the need to keep my mother "in the style to which she is accustomed" and fretted over the well-known fact that the French were rampant adulterers.

My parents didn't aspire to material wealth, and they didn't have much interest in popular culture. They were, in this sense, un-American. They spent what they earned on their children's education, on books, and on travel. They read voraciously and explored as much of the globe as they could—before we were teenagers, my sister and I had





been whisked to Chichicastenango, Lalibela, Nadi, and beyond.

As a child, I didn't always grasp the wisdom of my parents' choices. Sure, I loved to travel, and I loved to read (my father would complain when I combined the two: "Look up from your books! You travel like suitcases!"), but mostly I longed to have jeans from the Gap, to own my own record player, to wear my hair feathered like the cool girls at school. I watched a lot of TV—from fifth grade on, I came home from school to an empty house (my mum was in law school then) and kept company with *Get Smart*, *Gilligan's Island*, and what I considered a hipper set of shows, such as *Diff'rent Strokes* and *Family Ties*. By seventh grade, I took careful note of my friends' grown-up acquisitions, all of which were beyond my hope: Heidi owned a water bed! Liz got a tweed skirt suit from Woolco! Beatrice wore blue eye shadow!

In retrospect, my sense of what and how I should be was wonderfully partial and fragmented—suggested, rather than insisted on, by rock music, benign sitcoms, and the kids around me. In middle school in Toronto, I was pretty autonomous: I had a bus pass, a bike, and a house key; much of the time, nobody wor-

ried about me or knew where I was. It was the late Seventies; we had bad haircuts and wore terrible clothes, a universal unloveliness of which there is mercifully little visual record. If we had acne, we had acne; if our noses shone, they shone.

Even then I had a sense of being less serious than my parents, less real somehow, more readily distracted by nonsense. Born with the twentieth century, *their* parents—three of my grandparents lived into

their nineties—remembered the First World War. My parents themselves—my father in particular—had known privation, had endured the grimness of wartime, whereas my own life, they often reminded me, was safe, easy, and luxurious. My friends and I could only ever be armchair radicals.

Along with this hazy sense of inferiority came a sort of absolution—broadly shared, I think, in my generation. The comparative ease of our upbringing first inspired guilt, then defiance. If, as our parents said, we should be eternally grateful for our comfort, then couldn't we be grateful without feeling bad about it? Why should we accept that the hard path was always superior? Why shouldn't we enjoy life's pleasures? Why believe that reading Beckett or, God forbid, Heidegger, was an innately more worthy activity than watching music videos? Says who? But the rebellion was half bluster; the wiser voices of our elders nagged at us.

For me, at least, this tension has never been wholly resolved. The lure of certain distractions is still considerable—give me a TV and I can watch almost anything with a dramatic narrative. And yet I know from personal experience that an hour spent reading Beckett is an hour that stimulates and abides in a way that an hour watching *Scandal* never can. From my parents' example, I know that insofar as is possible,





one must daily choose what matters, that this will be found within, not without. And that then, crucially, one shouldn't waste a thing—not a leftover, not a Ziploc bag, not a single hour of our time on this earth.

But the message that our generation has disseminated into the broader culture isn't this. It isn't even conflicted. We've cast off the grouching of our elders and are teaching our children differently. We waste resources galore (in spite of our belated efforts to change), and, glued to our devices, playing video games, or checking the *Daily Mail*, we waste enormous amounts of time—even while pretending otherwise. I can't tell you how many women I see buying bathing suits on their phones on the subway. But we persuade ourselves that this is a more substantive activity than having coffee with a friend: shopping while traveling, we're multitasking! We worship purposefulness. To embark on an endeavor that has no clear aim—to amble through a city, or to spend an entire afternoon conversing in a restaurant, or to lie in bed and read a book chosen at random from the shelf, or to major in English literature, for that matter—has come to be seen as wasteful.

In such a context, the need for art, film, and literature to *entertain* becomes disturbingly pressing: that is its purpose. It's the reason why we bother with it, and without a reason, who would bother? Art that entertains less readily, that might demand real effort and persistence and in so doing illuminate some aspect of how we live—such a prospect is too vague, the return on investment too unclear. I worry about the future of philosophy, art, literature, and strangeness.

What does this mean for our children? In my insistence that some experiences are richer than others—that reading *Buddenbrooks* will prove more nourishing than scrolling through Instagram stamping likes on photographs the way an immigration officer stamps pass-

ports—I seem to my thirteen-year-old daughter and eleven-year-old son as judgmental and austere, as antediluvian, as my own parents sometimes seemed to me. When they're reading or watching, they want to relax. They do a great deal more homework than I ever did; they participate in an endless round of extracurricular activities. If they're not on the run from soccer practice to piano lessons, they're busy with text messages and Snapchat, with Tumblr and Vine. They revere YouTube as the repository of



all knowledge—which in some ways, of course, it is.

It seems on one level pointless to pressure them to resist the pace of their lives and the constant distraction of their media: their world isn't mine, any more than my world was my parents'. If my son spends his afternoons watching FIFA videos on YouTube, or my daughter studying nail-painting tutorials, these are no worse ways to spend time than watching *Get Smart* or *Diff'rent Strokes*—arguably, they are better. Their world, however, is more monolithic. Now that the very understanding of experience is communal, there's less leeway for idiosyncrasy, less patience for indirection. These days, if you can't share a thought—either because it's hard to articulate or because it would take more words than a tweet

or a text will allow—you might as well skip it.

When I recall my formative years, of course there was loads of reading, and travel, and biking, and TV. But there was also a whole lot of boredom. I guess that's what concerns me, as a parent: that my kids, who lack for nothing even more than I did, are not only unversed in material deprivation and insufficiently familiar with self-restraint but, most terribly, they know nothing of nothingness. Having no truly empty time, they're unfamiliar too with the unexpected and exhilarating flowers that can grow there.

I want my children to embrace doing nothing, to embrace the slowing of an afternoon to a near standstill, when all you can hear is the laborious ticking of the clock and the dog snoring on the sofa, the rain's patter at the window, the occasional swoosh of a slowly passing car. Remember those days? The exasperation, the excruciating itchiness of them? My kids would have to dive in, live through the agony, and come out the other side. They'd have to learn to lie on the lawn watching ants scale the grass blades; they'd have to linger, digits pruning, in the bathtub; they'd have to stop, to be still, and then to wait, and wait, and wait, allowing time to fatten around them, like a

dewdrop on the tip of a leaf. And then, only then, who knows what they might imagine or invent?

How can I teach them, when they're not of an age to listen, and when, more problematically, I too often live in the world just as they do? In practice, I set a poor example, never idling or ambling or reading in bed. I'd like to figure out how to be the kind of parent who holds at bay all demands and exhortations, all fripperies and nonsense. I'd like to show the wisdom of restraint. A different version of washing out Ziploc bags and mending moth holes, it arises from the same impulse: from the understanding that if you attend thoughtfully to what you already have, you need nothing more. It's all here, inside and in the room—not on the screen—before us. ■



# WHAT RECOVERY?

Two years in a town where the Great Recession never ended

By Kai Wright

I came into town on a highway from Atlanta, the shining symbol of a young and prosperous New South. It was February 2013 and I was making the first of several trips to Albany, Georgia, in the southwestern part of the state, sixty miles from the Alabama border. Jimmy Carter's evangelism took root here. It is the home Ray Charles evokes when he says Georgia's on his mind. Stately antebellum plantations line the highway into town, rare historic gems that still stand because this area avoided direct fire during the Civil War.

Today, millionaires and billionaires host lavish retreats in the mansions and hunt quail on the former farmland that surrounds them. The celebrity chef Paula Deen is one of Albany's most famous daughters; when she got herself into trouble waxing nostalgic about plantation-style dinners with black servants, she was probably

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talking about her experiences in these houses. To be fair, jobs on the plantations are coveted by some of Albany's black residents. Ask around and some people will tell you that they pay better than most other businesses in the area.

As the Great Recession came to a close, the roll call of the nation's poorest cities was topped by familiar Rust Belt names—Reading, Pennsylvania; Flint, Michigan; Bloomington, Indiana. Most of these cities had been intensely poor for decades, but Albany, which tied Bloomington for third place on the list in 2010, was different. Its collapse was recent—and fast. Between 2007 and 2010, Albany's poverty rate jumped 12

points, to a record high of 39.9 percent. More than two thirds of Albany's 76,000 residents are black, and since 2010, their poverty rate has climbed even higher, to nearly 42 percent.

Albany is, of course, only a more extreme example of something that's happening across the country. Not counting the elder-

ly, among whom Social Security has driven a sharp and lasting decline in poverty, a greater share of Americans are poor today than at any time since the 1960s. In the United States in 2013, 45.3 million people lived below the official poverty line, with incomes of less than \$12,000 a year for a two-adult, two-child family. A third of them were children. Twenty million people live in what economists call deep poverty, with incomes of less than half the official poverty line. That's almost three times the number of people who lived in deep poverty in 1976.

Historically, the poverty rate has tracked the overall economy, but that's



no longer true. The period between the 2001 and 2007 recessions was the first expansionary business cycle on record in which the poverty rate increased, according to an Economic Policy Institute analysis of Census Bureau data. It's also the first expansionary cycle on record during which incomes in the middle quintile fell. A return to the prerecession economy won't alter the trend because, as Albany's story shows, the problems began with the boom, not the bust.

Even if the economy continues to grow, the effects of the past decade will linger. "While the poverty rate changes, the rate of escaping from poverty doesn't," says Austin Nichols, formerly a labor economist at the Urban Institute. "When you have a shock of poverty, because of recessions, say, and poverty goes up, it has a very long-term impact." Absent a significant intervention, the 14.7 million kids who live in poverty today are extremely likely to become poor adults.

Albany was established on the banks of the Flint River in 1836. It was named after Albany, New York, in hopes that it would become a similar center of trade for the South. Today, if you linger on the west and north sides of town, where the city's predominantly white middle class is concentrated, Albany seems like any other midsize American city. There are strip malls and office workers and tidy, modest homes.

But if you scratch the surface of even the relatively well-off areas, you begin to see how a town in which four out of ten people are poor can collapse in on itself. It's a process defined not by big, dramatic moments of pain but by a quiet, steady throb—a pain you can manage, until you can't. It manifests in people like Floyd Faulk, a white, fifty-two-year-old lifelong resident who's gone from operating a thriving drapery-design business to clambering around rooftops to install satellite dishes. He



keeps the design business open only to stave off formal bankruptcy.

Downtown, near an eighty-five-year-old railway bridge that spans the river, there's a small park with live oaks covered in Spanish moss. On Broad Avenue, one of the city's main thoroughfares, the shops stand empty, their windows bearing seemingly permanent FOR RENT signs. The few tenants that remain are bottom-feeding ventures such as personal-finance shops and rapid-refund outfits. LaNicia Hart's storefront is one of the exceptions: the display window is filled with meticulously arranged sportswear decked out with fraternity symbols. Hart, who grew up in Albany, is a young entrepreneur who in many ways embodies the New South, in which a black middle class is said to thrive. She returned to her hometown after college to open an embroidery business. But even her store offers evidence of Albany's weak economy: most days, she keeps the front door locked while she fulfills online orders in the back.

Faulk and Hart represent the 60 percent of Albany residents, black and white, who are keeping themselves above the poverty line. They are notable for having remained despite possessing the resources to leave. If there's one

simple explanation for the area's spike in poverty, it's that when thousands of jobs left, the middle-class workers who once held them left, too, creating a more densely poor city. "We had a functioning school, we really did," said Cindy Towns, who teaches civics at Dougherty Comprehensive High School and sent her three daughters there. "But families started moving, looking for opportunity elsewhere. And those families that left and moved were the ones who were more involved. They were the ones who *could* move."

We were sitting in the classroom of Ashley Mitchell, one of Towns's colleagues, at the end of a long school day. Mitchell, who graduated from Dougherty High herself, ticked off the challenges that have accompanied the city's increasing poverty. "Low test

scores, lack of literacy, a lot more children being diagnosed with ADHD, learning disabilities. The school pride, the school culture goes down. Nobody wants to send their kids to school where the school is struggling. So when we lost that pool of kids"—she finally took a breath—"it really affected the school."

It's well known to Albany's black residents that whites are fleeing to neighboring Lee County, taking tax dollars with them. The county's name is often invoked as a slur: *Well, she lives out in Lee County now, you know.* People in Albany accuse white real-estate brokers of steering buyers away from the city. On one of my earliest visits to Albany, I sat in on a meeting of the Economic Development Commission that addressed race relations in town. During the discussion, an officer at the Marine Corps logistics base, the largest employer in town, described the chal-





lenges that mixed-race couples on his base have had in Albany. Integrated relationships are “just not normal here,” he said, twisting his face in frustration.

Near Dougherty High, at a food bank in a mostly black area on the east side of town, I met Juanita Nixon, who works for her church’s family-resource center, which provides emergency meals to the poor. When I asked her what Albany’s recession had meant for the people she served, she echoed an answer I heard all over the city: they’ve lost hope. She turned to Eliza McCall, the food bank’s spokesperson, and joked, “If you put hope on the inventory, I’d order it all.”

McCall estimated that the food bank would have to give out more than 11 million pounds of food this year to get just one meal a day to every person in the county who is in crisis. The bank can meet only a third of that demand. Nixon has worked for her church for twenty-five years but has never seen anything like the situation today. “When I leave here,” she said, waving toward the loading dock, “I’ll come in contact with six or seven families that need help.”

I met Major Jones in a Red Lobster parking lot just outside down-

town. He couldn’t make it from his truck to the restaurant without stopping to shake hands with neighbors, church members, and former co-workers. Albany is a close-knit community, and Jones has been here a long time. His short fade is flecked with gray, but he’s boyish in appearance and demeanor; his devout Christianity doesn’t stop him from enjoying a bawdy joke in relaxed company.

Jones grew up sixty miles away, in Fort Gaines, Georgia, and moved to Albany in 1978. “Right out of high school,” he recalled. “There was a lot of work here. Firestone was here. Textile was here. Miller Brewing was coming here. You had Procter and Gamble. You had Georgia-Pacific.”

Shortly after arriving in Albany, he went to work at the Bobs Candies factory, where he stayed for more than twenty-five years. “I never got laid off from there, and I liked that. It wasn’t a lot of money. I was just old-fashioned and dedicated to what I was doing,” he said. He started at \$5.45 an hour and worked his way up to \$19, with health insurance, retirement, and, most important, guaranteed work. “We worked a lot of over-

time, so I got the hours. And that was great.”

As Albany’s manufacturing sector developed in the 1920s, many plants settled in poor, black neighborhoods, but they gave their best jobs to white residents. Bobs Candies was notable for hiring black workers who lived in the neighborhood.

Bob McCormack founded the company in 1919. It was run by three generations of McCormacks and weathered the Depression, the sugar rationing that accompanied World War II, and a tornado that flattened its facilities. In 1950, Gregory Harding Keller, Bob McCormack’s brother-in-law, invented a machine to twist soft candy into spiral stripes, which allowed the mass production of candy canes for the first time. “We were the largest peppermint-candy maker in the world,” Jones bragged.

“We had a wonderful workforce, and it was predominantly African Americans,” said Greg McCormack, who was the last in his family to run the business. “As many African Americans went into the workforce, there was a lot of discrimination, and Bobs was one of the only places that paid the same for blacks and whites.” It was an attractive place for



Left: Floor of the former Bobs Candies factory, which closed in 2005  
Right: Entrance to the Bobs Candies factory



black workers trying to get in on the midcentury economic boom, and its reputation still held when Jones came looking for work.

"Major would be a great example, I think, of someone that might not have been employable today in most industries," McCormack said. "He was young, and I think one of the hardest things when you're young is just to get work. And you learned job skills at Bobs that would help you later on. Major really

packed in a twelve-cane box made in the United States anymore," he complained. "And it's a shame. And part of the issue we had in the family is, I just didn't want to do that."

McCormack still complains about sugar prices, but he also criticizes the company's largest customer: Walmart. For candymakers, sugar prices are so critical because doing business with Walmart demands cutting costs to the bone. Suppliers compete fiercely

together under the umbrella of Farley's and Sathers Candy Company. It grabbed Jujufruits and Chuckles from Hershey's. Later it bought Brach's Confections. In 2012, it merged these companies with Ferrara Pan, which makes Red Hots and Lemonheads, to create the third-largest candymaker in the country, with annual sales of \$1 billion. Catterton continues to hold a majority stake.

Catterton closed Bobs Albany plant within months of buying the company. "I think they gave the workers thirty days' notice or something," Jones said. Nobody saw it coming. "You're just thinking, That won't happen with this company." Even with his severance—a relatively generous year's pay—and the savings he'd managed over twenty-five years, Jones still needed to cut lawns to make ends meet. He wasn't officially poor. He had his savings, and his wife, Vieliene, had a teaching job. But their years of economic security were over.

**O**n a Wednesday night in the middle of a hot summer, I went to a midweek open-mic show at the Oglethorpe Lounge in downtown Albany to learn about what most consider to have been the city's economic deathblow—the closing of Cooper Tire and Rubber. When Bobs closed, the city lost about 280 jobs. But Cooper employed five times that many people—and still more if you count its part-time workers.

When I arrived at the Oglethorpe, the night was just getting started and Chuck Jenkins was fussing with the sound system. He and a handful of others had dreamed up the weekly event as part of their effort to save the Oglethorpe, which has been around since the Fifties, from Albany's crashing economy. Jenkins had donated a garageful of sound equipment that he'd amassed while working at Cooper. A hulking sixty-year-old harmonica player who looked like a cross between a middle-aged hippie and a member of ZZ Top, he was quick to admit that he was still an amateur when it came to music. "I can't play but so long, or it'll be repetitive," he confessed. His bandmates were former co-workers. Tonight, they would join the show to cover everything from James Brown to AC/DC.



embraced that." Jones said that he twice turned down promotions to supervisor at Bobs—"You've got to constantly mentor people," he explained—before finally accepting the position for the night shift. He prospered.

Candymakers have long fought Congress over sugar prices, which they say are inflated because of U.S. sugar policy. Sugar producers, of course, argue that the candymakers are crying wolf in order to gain access to subsidized Brazilian and Chinese sugar. Whatever the cause, candymakers have spent decades watching their supply costs gain ground on their revenues. To compensate, they've begun taking advantage of free-trade agreements such as NAFTA. In 2001, Bobs opened a plant in Reynosa, a Mexican border town. For McCormack, that was the beginning of the end. "There's not a single red-and-white candy cane

to remain in the retail behemoth's favor. "You wake up one day and you lose thirty percent of your business because you didn't cut your price by a penny," McCormack said.

At Bobs, these pressures led to unprecedented rounds of layoffs. Jones was surprised when they kept him on as a supervisor even as people with college degrees were laid off. "I remember that day like it was yesterday," he said, his voice catching.

In 2005, the McCormacks sold Bobs to Catterton, a private-equity firm in Greenwich, Connecticut, that manages more than \$4 billion. It's a midsize player in the overall market, but it's one of the largest private-equity firms that focuses on the consumer sector. In 2002, Catterton began buying up candymakers. It acquired several flagging divisions from Kraft Foods and pulled them to-





The Oglethorpe's regular crowd is mostly white, but it's one of the few social spaces in Albany that is truly integrated. "I had a guy my age out at Cooper, and when we started our band, he asked me if black people could come to the restaurant where we played," Jenkins recalled. He

laughed and shook his head. "This was 2005!" Jenkins had been in Albany since 1970. He said he'd seen a lot of changes, but few as dramatic as Cooper's shutdown.

Jenkins was hired at Cooper in 1992, and was among the first to work at the Albany facility—his time card

was number 306. He stayed there until the plant closed, in 2009. He had been out of work ever since, spending down his pension and exhausting his unemployment benefits while taking classes and sending job applications into the void. "There is a depression that comes with that," he acknowledged quietly.

Jenkins started at Cooper as a machinist, spinning wire into rubber casings. "Then I went over to tire assembly, where we actually assembled the basic carcass of the tire," he explained. "I did that for eight and a half years, and then I became a material handler." He hauled giant coils around the plant to keep the various units humming. By the time of the shutdown, he'd graduated to a team that tested new production techniques. As at Bobs, no one at Cooper believed the end was coming until it arrived.

Plenty of U.S. tire factories had closed during the preceding years—many at the peak of the business cycle. This was another new and odd economic trend of the 2000s. After China was admitted to the World Trade Organization, in 2001, cheaply made Chinese tires flooded the U.S. market, and U.S. tire jobs went to China.

Cooper was one of several U.S. tire makers that opened plants in China during the 2000s; the company even sent workers from Albany to train their Chinese counterparts. Jenkins remembered that moment proudly. The Albany plant required a skilled workforce to make giant, complicated tires for trucks—the



smallest production error could be disastrous. "We were told this is probably the most modern of the tire plants, the

mer, could make it even easier for Armes to move more of Cooper's operations to Asia.

McCormacks: they were slow to lay off workers because the cost of hiring and training was so high. It was better to

weather the downturns and capitalize on the recoveries. Productivity used to drop during recessions, as companies temporarily employed more workers than needed. But according to Nichols, "That wasn't the case in the Great Recession; productivity actually rose.... What that indicates to me is, employers were letting go of more people than they had to. They were actually aggravating the problem."

When I returned to the Oglethorpe a few months after I first met Jenkins, he wasn't there. Friends said they hadn't seen him in weeks,

not since he'd taken a seasonal job working on the pecan harvest. At sixty, he had begun a new career as a farmhand.

"**T**his weekend, I was cutting grass and I said, 'Lord, I just need you to keep me busy today.' Two different people called me!" Major Jones was testifying in front of his Sunday-school class, part of a small congregation he and Vieliene founded in 2012. "All day Friday, I worked," he said, building volume and fervor as he recalled the weekend's rare good fortune. "Came yesterday, I said, 'Lord, I need some more work.' Another guy called me, said, 'Man, you can do the yard on Monday.'" It was an outpouring of opportunity right when he needed it, and to Jones, it was divinely inspired. "You have naught but His favor!"

"Amen, you got to believe," Vieliene said. "We're walking in favor!"

Our Bibles were open to Genesis, Chapter 15, in which Abram is hav-



most room to grow," Jenkins said. "We were led to believe that they would not have spent all this money here to develop this if they were going to..." He trailed off.

One week before Christmas in 2008, Cooper announced that it was closing the Albany operation. The company had determined that its expanding operations in China meant that one of its U.S. plants had to go. Management conducted an internal audit to pick the loser, setting off a frenzied competition. Two of the four plants were unionized, and the labor force made huge concessions to the company, including wage freezes. Albany's workers, who were not unionized, could offer nothing comprehensive.

Cooper's shift to China has been enormously lucrative for the company. In 2013, annual profits were \$241 million. The CEO, Roy Armes, who joined Cooper in 2007, made \$9 million last year. Trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the Obama Administration was trying to push through Congress this sum-

Jenkins said that during his seventeen years at Cooper, he topped out at around \$56,000 a year, plus benefits that included the pension he had just about burned through after four years of unemployment. Like so many others, he got caught between the simultaneous crises in the housing and job markets. Rather than lose the house that he had bought after starting at Cooper, he escaped foreclosure by sacrificing more than a third of his pension to pay off his mortgage. He figured that he'd at least avoid homelessness.

Recessions always create a trailing effect in which joblessness and poverty extend past the worst part of a downturn. But the most recent recession has had a tail like no other. As of May 2015, nearly 30 percent of the nation's unemployed had been out of work for at least six months.

"Part of it is there's this change in the social contract—employers behave differently now," says Austin Nichols. During previous recessions, large employers tended to behave like the



ing trouble trusting in the Lord. He has grown restless waiting for God to fulfill His promise that Abram would become the father of a great nation, and he wants to know how he can be sure it will come to pass. God offers reassurance, but reveals that Abram's people will endure 400 years of slavery and hardship. The people must hold on and bear up under their ordeals; only then will they be delivered to the promised land. This is familiar scripture for black Americans, certainly in the South. But for the Joneses, the teaching felt fresh and urgent. "God is working on my behalf!" Jones declared triumphantly at the end of his testimony.

Organized religion is just about the only industry still growing in Albany, a fact that inspires cynicism in some. Even the Joneses look warily at Albany's proliferating houses of worship. But, Vieliene told me, "people need hope." Their church is the House of Hope Fellowship Church, and their services are relentlessly positive. God's favor is celebrated with equal intensity for an out-of-work member who avoided eviction and for another who got a \$25 late fee waived at Sam's Club. As Vieliene put it, "We already know the devil is busy, why lift him up?"

In 2006, Jones was hired by a temp agency with a contract on the Marine Corps base. The catch was that his job would last only two years, until the end of his employer's contract. Since 2008, he's surfed from contractor to contractor, managing to stay in the workforce for two years at a time. "After people on the civil side kind of like you and they know you, they'll recommend for you to be picked back up," he said. "Ain't nothing guaranteed with that."

The government doesn't collect comprehensive data on how many public-sector jobs have been privatized in recent years, but an approximate measure of the change is the amount of money it spends annually on contractors; in 2012, that figure was \$517 billion, an increase of 150 percent from 2000, according to a recent National Employ-

ment Law Project analysis of federal data.

Jones said that he earned just a little less than his civil-service coworkers on the base, but he was not compensated for sick days, and his contract could be terminated at any time. That instability became clear to him in 2013, when across-the-board federal budget cuts, the so-called sequester, forced furlough days at the base. He lost a lot of hours, time he could scarcely afford. As it was, he was making the same wages—roughly \$19 an hour—that he had earned ten years earlier at Bobs. This kind of wage stagnation is widespread today, and it puts Jones and millions like him just one crisis away from insolvency.

**I**n the absence of a federal solution to these problems, some have argued for a fundamental change in how we build local economies. Shirley Sherrod, formerly the Department of Agriculture's director of rural development in Georgia, is perhaps most famous for having been caught in the crossfire between the Tea Party and the White House. In 2010, the Obama Administration pressured her to resign after Andrew Breitbart publicized a heavily edited video in which Sherrod appeared to confess that she had denied federal aid to a white farmer. The full video revealed that precisely the opposite had happened.

Long before Sherrod became cable-news fodder, however, she and her husband, Charles, were household names in southwest Georgia. Charles was among the first SNCC organizers to come to the region; there's a park dedicated to him in downtown Albany. Shirley grew up in Baker County, one of Albany's rural satellite communities, and has been one of the region's most dedicated poverty fighters.

I visited Shirley Sherrod at a plantation that her agricultural-development organization, New Communities, bought in 2011. The facility, which is used for research and training, seemed to exist in a different universe than the plantation as imagined by Paula Deen. Using the collective action of the

sharecroppers of her grandparents' generation as a model, Sherrod was teaching new farming methods and giving civil-rights workshops. "I can point from one community to another here in this county where people actually worked, together, to acquire land and do things in their community," she said.

The plantation is one of several loosely connected efforts that Sherrod oversees. Others include an old schoolhouse that's been remodeled as a USDA-certified commercial kitchen and an ongoing campaign to create a central processing center for local farmers. These efforts feel like drops in an ocean of need, but Sherrod argued that town by town, such projects can make a difference. "It could be a whole lot more, but what if it wasn't anything?"

Barack Obama was supposed to bring more options to places like Albany. As a candidate in 2008 and 2012, he campaigned against the currents that have concentrated wealth and intensified poverty in America. He said he was going to freeze foreclosures and demand that banks release job-creating capital for small businesses. He was going to invest in infrastructure to replace jobs lost to offshoring and the operational efficiencies of private equity. Some of these things have happened, but most have not. If the Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty passes, the offshoring, at least, will get worse. Meanwhile, House Republicans have led a campaign to blame poverty on the few, essential programs that hold it at bay for millions of families.

Given this political climate, Sherrod's brand of hyperlocal, worker-by-worker economic development has the advantage of at least acknowledging the crisis. There's not much time left for the federal government to similarly come to terms with reality.

In the meantime, Albany waits for a change. I once asked Major Jones if he thought his city was already beyond salvation. He answered carefully; his faith does not allow for total despair. "Death lies in the power of your tongue," he warned. "But sometimes, it's gotta get worse before it gets better." ■



# A CAMERA C

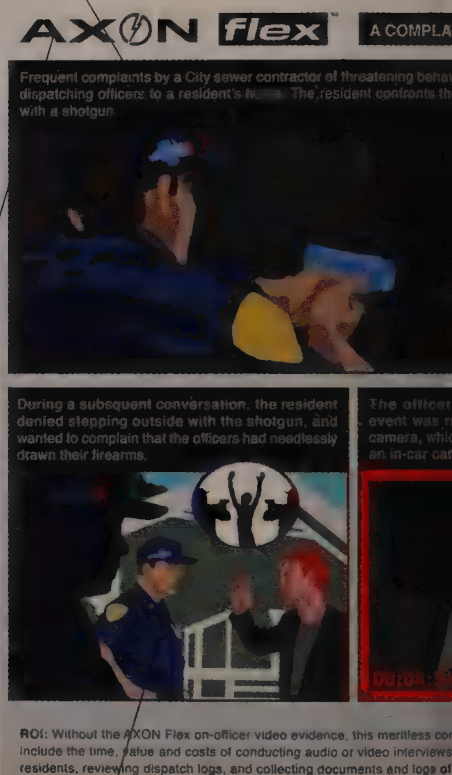
Taser International cash

By M

On December 1, 2014, after several months of protests against police brutality that began with the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, President Obama pledged \$75 million in federal funds to help purchase 50,000 police body cameras. Later that month, the mayor of Los Angeles announced that the city's police department would acquire nearly 7,000 cameras from Taser International in a deal worth an estimated \$42 million. In April, after the killing of Freddie Gray by Baltimore police, Hillary Clinton called for every police department in the United States to follow the LAPD's lead. It was yet another welcome development for Taser, the largest manufacturer of body cameras. Taser still makes most of its money from stun guns—until last year, only a handful of police departments had bought its cameras—but that may change soon. One early adopter was the eighty-three-officer force of Lake Havasu City, Arizona, which is about two hundred miles from Taser's Scottsdale headquarters. Lake Havasu was the first police department to go “full deployment” with Taser body cameras. Taser created comic strips, like this one, based on real episodes involving the LHPD cameras, which it included as part of a Thought-Leader Toolkit meant to illustrate the benefits of the technology. But do Taser's claims about its products match up with the expectations of the politicians who have advocated their use—that, in Clinton's words, the cameras will “improve transparency and accountability”?

The X2 stun gun, which debuted in 2006, was the first Taser product to include a camera. Ads aimed at the cops who would use it soon followed: “You're in the news, with a viral video starring you deploying your Taser X2 against a protester. The suspect is claiming police brutality. When controversy hits, the public usually hears one side of the story. Make sure it is yours!” “You've got to speak to them in their language,” Rick Smith, Taser's CEO, told me. “We are selling equipment to the police and have to calibrate our message on the benefit to them.” The idea for a Taser body-camera line emerged during a period of corporate turmoil in the early 2000s, when the company was under investigation by the SEC and faced a barrage of wrongful-death lawsuits for its stun guns. The company was “fighting for survival,” in Smith's words. He spent nearly \$100 million to develop and market the successor to the X2, the AXON camera. The investment is finally paying off: body-camera sales have quadrupled over the past year, and the company's stock price has tripled. There are now 41,000 AXON cameras in use at 3,000 police agencies nationwide. “Given the significant increase in attention to body cameras following the Ferguson incident, 2015 is our Super Bowl,” Smith told analysts during an earnings call this February.

Taser describes the cameras as a means to keep ordinary citizens on the side of the police and as an insurance policy against costly police-misconduct lawsuits. This comic strip depicts an incident that occurred in Lake Havasu City on October 14, 2010. In Taser's telling, a man who was brandishing a shotgun claimed that police officers had needlessly pointed their guns at him; he threatened to file a complaint until the officers told him that they had been filming the conversation. “A complaint was headed-off before the incident was even concluded,” the strip reads. (While the man never filed a formal complaint, he did call the police department the next day to criticize the officers' behavior.) Citing a study co-written by the police chief of Rialto, California, Taser says that cameras can lead to an 88 percent decrease in the number of complaints. Here is perhaps the real reason that body cameras were so quickly embraced by police departments and the federal government—they can save cities money.





# EVERY COP

on police misconduct  
Frazier

Over the past decade, citizen complaints related to police brutality and excessive force have cost cities billions of dollars; cities like New York and Chicago each pay around \$70 million a year to settle police-abuse claims. These figures, of course, might have more to do with the regular use of excessive force by police than with a barrage of dubious lawsuits. Nevertheless, Taser promises a handsome return on investment for police departments that buy its cameras. For an initial investment of \$90,000, the company says, the Rialto police department saved \$400,000. For Lake Havasu, though, the savings would have to be even greater: the city's current contract with Taser, unanimously approved by the city council in December 2012, will pay out \$448,000 over five years.



Improving police departments' bottom lines, however, is not the injustice that Michael Brown's parents or groups like the ACLU want to see addressed, though both have endorsed body cameras. One of Taser's ads promised, "With new technologies, truth will rise." The implication is that the cameras will, in the words of Lake Havasu police chief Dan Doyle, provide "true transparency" and show "exactly what happened." If an officer acts illegally, the camera will show it. But having a camera on doesn't ensure a just outcome. Body-camera footage accords higher value to an officer's perspective; it is literally from his or her point of view. It was a video filmed by a witness that led to murder charges against the police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina, who shot Walter Scott in the back. (Even so, the city announced plans the next day for "expediting body cameras for police officers." Taser also landed a \$2.4 million contract with Cleveland's police department following the fatal shooting of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice.) With the rise of body-camera footage, sociologists Kevin Haggerty and Ajay Sandhu argued recently in *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, police will "try to embed the footage from controversial videos in the world view of the police, offering interpretations of such actions as being authorized or legitimate.... The struggle over such videos will therefore occur in the realm of meaning."

Despite calls from the ACLU and others for strict rules about when cameras run, police still control when and how long to record. Some even use a slang term, "red," to warn other officers when cameras are rolling. Consider a police stop in St. Louis last year, in which a dashboard-camera video captured officers kicking a man. Another officer yells, "Everybody hold up. We're red right now, so if you guys are worried about cameras, just wait." After that, the footage stops. As long as police can shut the cameras off when they want to get aggressive with a suspect, the technology won't do much to curb excessive force. In a final irony, cameras may not even save money over the long run. Barak Ariel, a lecturer at the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge and one of the authors of the Rialto study, urged caution: user licenses, storage space, security, maintenance, and system upgrades—much of which is proprietary—could add up to "billions of dollars worldwide." In Lake Havasu, the police have had to settle only two complaints since 2004, for a total of \$70,000—compared, again, with the nearly \$500,000 that the city has committed to spend on Taser cameras. I did a thorough review of both cases. Body-camera footage wouldn't have saved the city a penny. ■

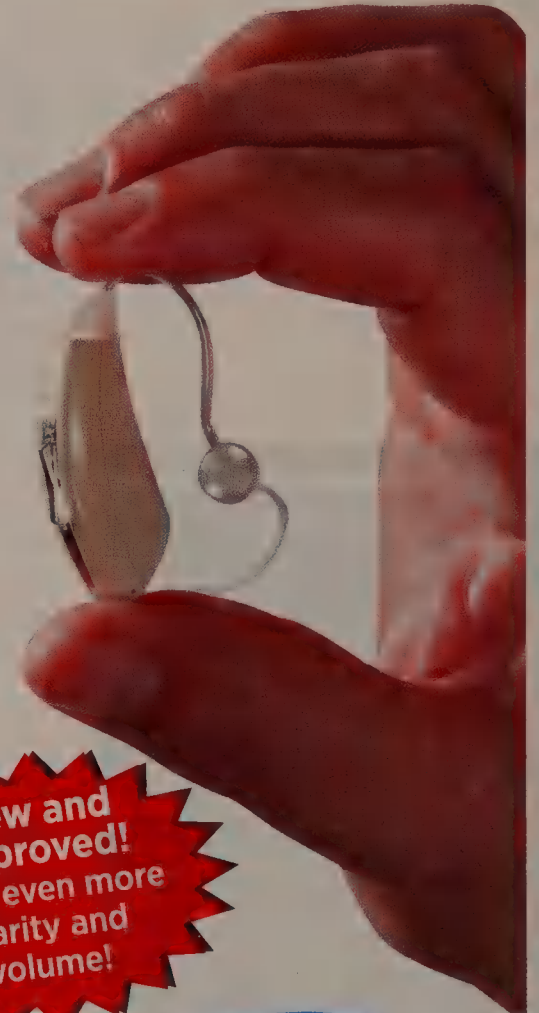
Mya Frazier is a technology and business journalist based in Columbus, Ohio.



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# HOUSE OF FIRE

Can India's Parsis survive their own success?

By Nell Freudenberger

Fali Madon was looking for a bride. A boyish twenty-seven-year-old with twin passions for physical fitness and expensive cars, Fali was the chief priest of a Parsi fire temple in the Colaba district of Mumbai. For six years he'd been searching for a wife from within his tiny, tight-knit community—the Parsis, Indian practitioners of the ancient Zoroastrian faith, number some 60,000 in a country of 1.2 billion—but so far he'd had no luck. To help his chances, Fali visited a bar on a Sunday evening last summer for a karaoke night organized by a Parsi youth group. He showed up in stylish rectangular glasses and a tight-fitting Michael Jackson T-shirt. The lights were low and the bartenders did a brisk business as pop songs reverberated off the stone walls and beamed ceiling. While Fali chatted

*Nell Freudenberger is the author, most recently, of *The Newlyweds* (Knopf), a novel. Her work on this article was supported by a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.*



with friends, the crowd sang the chorus of John Denver's "Country Roads." He mentioned that he was planning to attend a rain dance in August, at the height of the monsoon season, where—if it wasn't raining already—participants would dance under jets of water. When the first chords of Jackson's "Black or White" came over the sound system, the crowd whistled and the emcee called Fali's name; it was his turn to sing.

in a quiet corner of fashionable South Mumbai, near the navy cantonment as well as the shops and offices of the World Trade Centre.

When I arrived at the *agiary* complex, Fali's father, Khushroo, who is also a priest, led me under an umbrella to their accommodations; as an outsider, I wasn't allowed in the temple itself. Fali and Khushroo were wearing the garments of their office: a white cotton jacket that ties at the throat

I first met Fali on a rainy day in July of last year. The fire temple, or *agiary*, where he lives and works is surrounded by a large courtyard with palm trees and bougainvillea growing in pots. Two leonine *fravahars*, winged guardians with human faces, flank a pair of ornate bronze doors that lead to the inner sanctum, where a sacred fire, the tending of which is Fali's primary responsibility as priest, has burned continuously for 180 years. Colaba was still an island when the fire temple was built, in 1836; now it stands



and chest, called a *dugli*, and a white tapered cap, or *pagri*. Fali told me that as a member of the hereditary Parsi priesthood, he had always expected to officiate at least part-time. He was ordained by his father at thirteen, following a twenty-four-day period of ritual seclusion inside the fire temple. After graduating from college with a degree in sociology, he took a job with the Godrej Group, a Parsi family business that is one of India's largest conglomerates. Later he managed a Swarovski store, worked as a trainer at a Gold's Gym, and even performed magic—a common sideline for Zoroastrian priests—with his father, who was known for his ability to make BMWs disappear.

According to the Madons, it was Khushroo, not Fali, who should have been appointed chief priest of the Colaba *agiary*. By 2013, however, when the position opened up, Khushroo had become the focus of the two most vitriolic disputes within Mumbai's small but influential Zoroastrian community. Interfaith marriages have long been permitted for Parsi men, but Khushroo is one of the few priests in the city who is willing to perform them for Parsi women as well; he also welcomes the children of those marriages into the faith with a *navjote*, an initiation ceremony similar to a bar or bat mitzvah. Many Parsis argue that accepting the children of intermarried women is essential if the community is going to survive, but Khushroo says that he is not motivated by demographic concerns. Citing the Gathas, hymns composed by the Prophet Zoroaster, he insisted that anyone can follow the religion. "I don't know why they are restricting it only to Parsis," he said.

Even more controversial is Khushroo's willingness to say funeral prayers for Parsis who choose cremation over the traditional Zoroastrian practice of sky burial, in which corpses are placed on open-air towers to be consumed by vultures and other birds of prey. In 2009 the trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (B.P.P.), an elected group of seven men and women who administer the enormously valuable real-estate holdings of Mumbai's Par-

si community, prohibited Khushroo from performing funeral ceremonies at Doongerwadi, the fifty-five-acre forested estate that surrounds the so-called Towers of Silence. In 2011, the Bombay High Court lifted the ban, but the B.P.P. appealed the case to the Indian Supreme Court, where it languished for three years. Khushroo knew that the litigation would make it difficult for him to secure a permanent position as a priest, so he told the main patron of the Colaba *agiary*, "If you appoint me as a chief priest in your fire temple, you will have a lot of political flak. I have an

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## THE CIVIC LIFE OF INDIA, AND ESPECIALLY MUMBAI, IS ALMOST UNIMAGINABLE WITHOUT PARSIS

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idea—just consider it for one minute. You appoint my son. I will be behind him."

While Fali's eighty-six-year-old great-aunt served me sweet, milky tea, the young chief priest went into the sanctuary to perform the *Uziren Geh*, a ritual prayer that marks one of the five periods of the Zoroastrian day. Like nearly a third of Parsis, Fali's aunt had never married; she often stayed at the fire temple with the Madons and liked to spoil her great-nephew by cooking him *dhansak*, a Parsi dish made from mutton and lentils. (Fali, in turn, had taught her to play solitaire on his computer.) When Fali returned after the ritual, he applauded the patrons, who had appointed him chief priest in July 2013: "They said, 'Let controversies come, but we will take a bold stand.'"

Fali was used to receiving unwanted attention because of his father's opinions. In high school, his religion teacher, who was also a B.P.P. trustee, mocked Khushroo's unorthodoxy and suggested in front of the class that Fali and his family were performing the irregular ceremonies for financial reward. And since the B.P.P. brought its case to the Supreme Court, Fali has sometimes been mentioned along with his father in the local and na-

tional press. Still, he counted his appointment as a major honor.

Fali's position at the *agiary* gave him a central role in the controversies surrounding his father, but it also complicated his marriage prospects. The income of a Zoroastrian priest is no match for what an educated young man might earn in India's booming technology and finance industries, which is why Fali's younger brother, Jimmy, went abroad, to London, for college. Jimmy, who now works as a software engineer, performs ceremonies for British Parsis in his spare time, but he acknowledged that being a full-time priest in India is much harder. Among some young people in Mumbai, he told me, the stereotype is that you became a priest if you didn't graduate or get a job. And while Fali is allowed, and expected, to live at the fire temple, he receives no health insurance or pension. When I first met him he said that marrying a non-Parsi was out of the question; finding a Parsi wife meant wooing someone who could accept a life tied to the rhythms of the fire temple and whose family would be willing to embrace one of the faith's most notoriously liberal practitioners.

Fali complained that the current set of B.P.P. trustees had "spoiled the name of the community," but his disdain for his father's antagonists did not extend to Zoroastrian Youth for the Next Generation, the youth wing of the B.P.P., which had organized the karaoke night. At the bar, the crowd had shouted for him with special fervor—almost as a mascot might be hailed by fans whose pride stopped short of inspiring them to put on the costume themselves. Even Khushroo was enthusiastic about ZYNG events, though several of the group's organizers were children of the trustees who had brought the case against him. In such a small community, there were only so many places where a young man might meet his future wife.

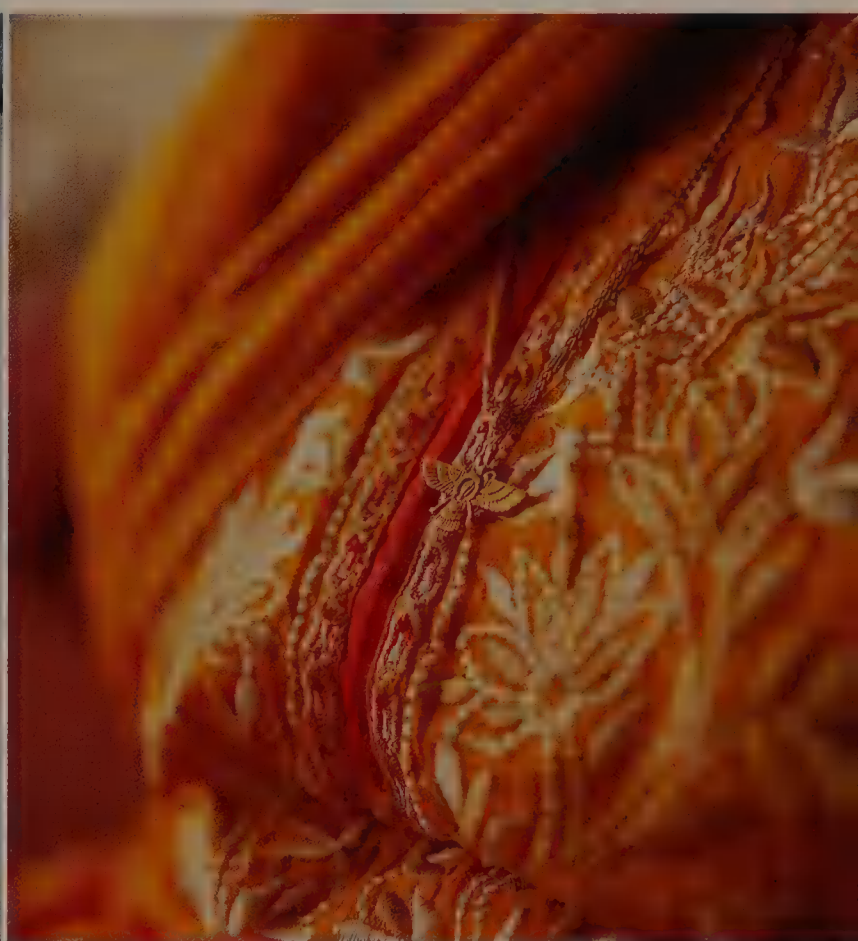
**Z**oroastrianism is a 3,500-year-old faith based on the appealingly concrete practice of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds." In the tenth century, the ancestors of today's Parsis fled persecution under



Iran's Muslim Arab conquerors and traveled to India—by open boat, according to legend—seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity. By most accounts, they found it: Parsis were among the first Indians to take advantage of Western education, and during the nineteenth century a number of them made fortunes as bankers, moneylenders, and maritime traders. Shipping opium to China was

whose novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* follows a Parsi musician who can hear Western music before it is composed, told me that the Parsis of Bombay “were among the city’s greatest benefactors. The cosmopolitan, wide-ranging, tolerant, artistic character of Bombay in the post-independence years had much to do with the disproportionately large influence of the small Parsi community.”

followers who were returning from a bonfire in Bombay’s mill district. The nationalists had set alight foreign-made clothes—thousands of rupees’ worth—to illustrate their commitment to *swadeshi*, or self-reliance, and the sight of their countrymen cheering the prince infuriated them. Yet Parsis such as Bhikaiji Cama, who designed an early version of the Indian flag, and



especially lucrative, and many Parsi families reinvested their profits from that enterprise in the textile industry. The dazzlingly successful Tata family, who got their start operating cotton mills in Bombay, went on to found a multinational corporation that now accounts for more than 2 percent of India’s GDP. Parsis started the first Indian cricket club, in 1848, and they embraced Western art forms, music in particular. Some of the most internationally recognized Indian artists have been Parsi: Freddie Mercury (born Farrokh Bulsara), the conductor Zubin Mehta, and Rohinton Mistry, whose novels encouraged America’s love affair with Anglophone Indian literature. Salman Rushdie,

The light complexions some Parsis inherited from their Persian ancestors almost certainly improved their relations with the British; during the Raj, they often served as liaisons between the colonial authorities and other Indians. This position didn’t always endear them to their compatriots. In 1874 a reference to the Prophet Mohammed in a book by a Parsi author sparked a brutal riot, and in 1921 Parsis were involved in a street fight occasioned by the Prince of Wales’s visit to Bombay. According to Naresh Fernandes, in his book *City Adrift*, the confrontation involved a group of Parsis who had watched the royal procession and a crowd of Gandhi’s

Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian elected to the House of Commons, were instrumental in the struggle for independence. Life has been mostly peaceful for the Parsis since 1947: “By then they’d become too prosperous to be scrapping in the street, I think,” Fernandes told me.

Charity is encouraged by Zoroastrianism, but philanthropy was also a useful way to purge the taint of the opium trade and of colonial favoritism. Today, so many schools, hospitals, and research institutions bear the names of Parsis that the civic life of India, and especially Mumbai, is almost unimaginable without them. Parsis maintain a reputation for moral rectitude in a city that

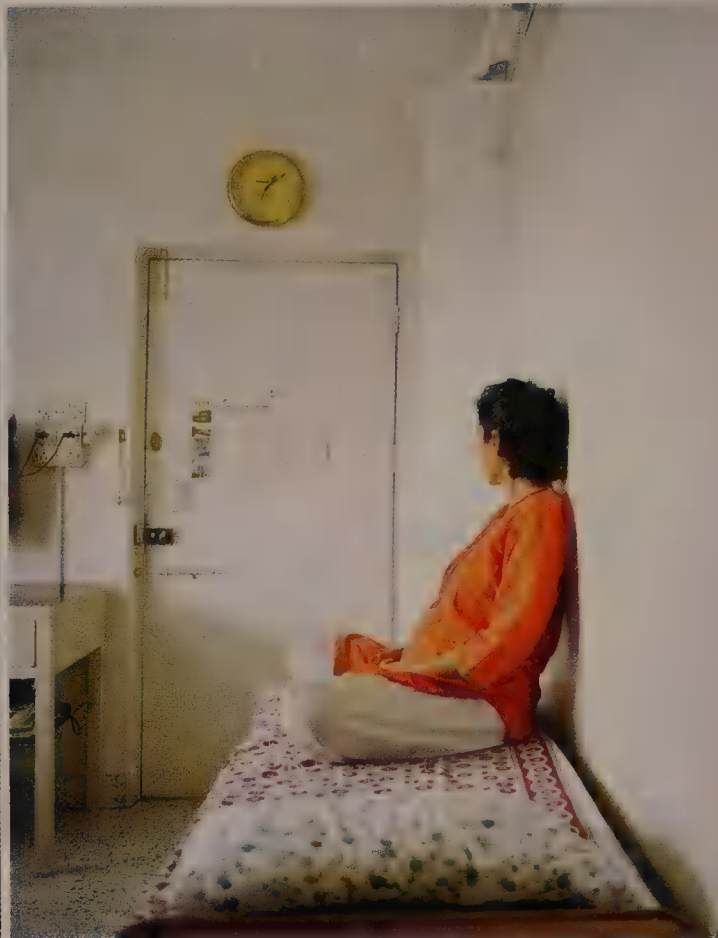


isn't known for it. ("If you're looking for a used car," a Hindu friend told me, "you want the Parsi-owned Fiat.") The stereotypical Parsi has a sense of humor, likes a drink (the "Parsi peg"), and is forgiven for being a little eccentric because of his charm. Their small numbers make them insignificant as a vote bank—the only Zoroastrian name in the cabinet of prime minister Narendra

munity could fit comfortably in the stands of Kolkata's Eden Gardens, the preferred stadium of India's national cricket team. Parsis have one of the lowest fertility rates on earth, which most studies attribute to a culture that encourages late marriage and singlehood. Dinyar Patel, a historian of South Asia at the University of South Carolina who has written about the demo-

fertility-treatment program designed to stop the community's population decline.

**P**arveen Pavri—not her real name—was one of the first women to successfully conceive with the help of Jiyo Parsi's subsidized in vitro fertilization. Pavri is a striking woman in her late thirties with strong features and an intellectual intensity



Modi belongs to a Hindu former beauty queen who married into the faith—and the behind-the-scenes nature of their political influence might be the reason they're admired more often than resented for their wealth, education, and cosmopolitanism. Known by the nickname *bawas*—from a Gujarati word for "father"—they are Indians who represent an escape from the most difficult things about India, and for that they are beloved.

The Parsi population peaked at 115,000 in 1941, just before independence, and since then the decline in their numbers has been so steep that extinction is an imminent threat. Today, the entire com-

graphic crisis, explained that "in India everyone is pressured by a certain age, especially women, to get married." In the Parsi community, he said, that pressure is "noticeably absent." The trends persist across socioeconomic lines: the bleak demographic picture is similar in rural Gujarat and affluent, cosmopolitan Mumbai.

Most of the family-planning initiatives undertaken by the Indian government are working to keep the country's population, which is growing by more than 40,000 people per day, in check. It's a testament to the Parsis' outsize influence, then, that in September 2013, the government launched Jiyo Parsi, an advocacy and

that magnifies her physical presence. She earned a doctorate in psychology with a dissertation on the effects of sexual abuse on South Asian women, and, in the years before she had children, spent much of her time doing pro bono counseling, especially for single Parsi women hoping to get married.

Pavri lives in one of Mumbai's northern suburbs; her apartment is part of a network of community-owned housing open only to Parsis. When I visited her last summer, five months into her pregnancy, the landing on her floor was clouded with a noxious, sweet smoke that might have alarmed another expectant mother. Pavri waved a



hand impatiently in front of her face. "Fumigation," she said, before ushering me into a living room with a hilltop view.

Pavri grew up in the midst of an extended family, and describes herself as less a devout Zoroastrian than someone whose identity is closely bound up with being Parsi. She told me that it took ten years of searching before she met her husband. Most of her relatives had found their spouses using detailed horoscopes called *kundli*, but Pavri, who considered the method unnecessarily restrictive—not to mention superstitious—arranged her marriage in the contemporary manner: on the Internet. She and her husband had a brief courtship after finding each other on a Parsi matrimonial website, and they started trying to have a baby as soon as they were married. When she still wasn't pregnant four years later, they approached Jiyo Parsi for help.

"You are respected whether you are married or have children or don't," Pavri told me. "Which is, I think, a very progressive outlook, because it took the pressure off me. But at the same time it meant that in some way the risk-taking was my own." Like many Indians, she'd been wary of advanced fertility treatments, and hadn't known much about how they worked. "A lot of the elderly people don't really know what I.V.F. is," she said. "In the community, they are the ones you look up to." When I asked Anahita Pandole, Pavri's doctor and the obstetrician in charge of Jiyo Parsi's medical program, about the stigma surrounding I.V.F. in India, she first maintained that there was none. But later she admitted that many of her patients switched hospitals just before delivering their babies. "Very often they won't deliver at this hospital because it's connected to the I.V.F. department."

When Pavri learned that I.V.F. had helped her conceive twins, she and her husband were startled and anxious. At the time of my visit, they hadn't yet made preparations for the babies in the apartment, but two calendars were pinned to the front door. The 600-square-foot

apartment was especially quiet by Mumbai standards. The only sounds were the faraway traffic and a single, wet crow calling from a wire against a lead-colored sky. A family shrine, common in Parsi homes, held pictures of Zoroaster and of Pavri's late parents, along with a fresh marigold and a candle enclosed in a silver latticework shade. Her father was fifty years old when she was born, and her mother died of cancer, which is unusually prevalent in the community's tiny gene pool, when she was only ten. Waiting for the babies, Pavri found that she missed her par-

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### SINCE 1941, THE DECLINE IN THE PARSI POPULATION HAS BEEN SO STEEP THAT EXTINCTION IS AN IMMINENT THREAT

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ents more than ever. She put her hands under her belly to support the unaccustomed weight, and described a "huge malaise" among Parsis that she admits would seem a luxury in many other Indian communities: "Everyone's living on their own island."

"I have a problem," Najma Heptulla told me last summer at her office in New Delhi. "I have to get Parsis to have more babies. I have to get everyone else to have less." As India's minister of minority affairs, Heptulla shares responsibility for Jiyo Parsi with the B.P.P. She has spent much of her thirty years in government working on women's issues, and she tends to speak her mind even when it gets her in trouble. Referring to the children of Parsi women who have married outside the faith, she said, "They should accept the children. They should change their attitude if they really want the community to survive."

What Heptulla sees as her double challenge was tragically illustrated a few months after we met. In November, thirteen women died at sterilization camps in the state of Chhattisgarh, in central India. The women came from poor farming families, and had received monetary inducements

from the state government—the equivalent of less than ten dollars each—to undergo tubal-ligation surgery. That same month, Jiyo Parsi released a print advocacy campaign that was designed by a Parsi-owned advertising agency. The ads featured recognizable Parsi types, with dire warnings about the community's demographic fate. In one ad, a ballerina in a tiara and tutu looks down at the camera, above the tagline, "Who will be snooty about being superior, if you don't have kids?" In another, a sign outside Mumbai's largest Parsi colony has been changed to read HINDU COLONY: "If you don't get married and have kids, this area will have a new name in your lifetime." The ads incited fury among many Parsis, who argued that the campaign infringed on women's reproductive freedom and sowed intercommunal friction. The press pointed out the hypocrisy of a government that subsidized expensive fertility treatments for a wealthy community while bribing the poor to be sterilized.

In 2002, when I was in India trying to write a book, I tagged along with a friend to a *navjote* in Juhu, a suburb of Mumbai. Zoroastrians believe that children are incapable of sinning until they choose to join the religion, and a *navjote* marks that occasion. The ceremony took place inside a modern, glass-fronted beach house, where the children had a ritual bath and sipped consecrated urine from a white bull to purify themselves. The practice has its roots in ancient Iran, where animal urine was a common antiseptic. ("That's the only part you dread," the young man who was initiated told me later.) During the ceremony, girls and boys alike are invested with symbols of their new responsibility: a sacred shirt and cord that they are supposed to wear under their clothes for the rest of their lives. A pocket on the front of the thin muslin shirt is meant as a repository for the good thoughts, words, and deeds to come. Siblings close in age normally share a *navjote*, which can be as expensive as a wedding; at the ceremony I attended, the brother and sister, twelve and seven, took turns



shouting the prayers, each trying to overpower the other. The priests, who wore white cloths over their mouths to prevent ritual contamination, covered the ground with rice, pomegranate seeds, and rose petals to symbolize immortality and prosperity.

After the ceremony, the party moved outside, to an expansive lawn that sloped down to the beach, where fourteenth-century Vijayanagar temple statues complemented modern Japanese sculptures in black stone. Adults sipped bright cocktails in the shade of coconut palms while a magician performed for the children. A keyboard player accompanied guests who wanted to sing, of whom there were many: the great-grandmother of the newly initiated siblings belted a nostalgic rendition of "The Ballad of Grace Darling," an English folk song about a Victorian lighthouse keeper's daughter. The boys at the party slipped down to the beach to play cricket as soon as they could.

A few weeks later, I had lunch with Pheroza Vakil, a great-aunt of the children whose *navjote* I'd witnessed; she had volunteered to hire the priest and to help the children prepare their prayers during the months leading up to the event. We sat in the courtyard of her home at Khareghat Colony, a Parsi enclave at the foot of Malabar Hill. Pheroza had lived in the large apartment on the ground floor of Wadia House—a pale-yellow mansion with white columns—since 1917, when she was four years old. When she was eighteen, her father died suddenly of a heart attack, and Pheroza had worked hard to contribute to the family's income. After graduating from the elite Queen Mary School, she studied with Maria Montessori in Madras, and later opened a nursery school in her home. In the evenings she taught swimming lessons at a local pool. Pheroza, who never married, was known for her daring fashion choices and late nights on the town. In the 1940s, when Indian women were almost never seen exercising in public, she used to jog along the Hughes Road flyover, and during World War II, on the brink of India's independence, she drove an ambulance in Bombay.

Pheroza's mother was a Wadia, a member of one of India's most illustrious Parsi families. Lowjee Wadia, an eighteenth-century carpenter from Surat, built Bombay's first dry dock and helped turn the city into a powerhouse of trade. (Like many Parsi family names—Doctor, Engineer, and Batliwala, "bottle seller," are common—Wadia is an occupational name; it designates a master shipbuilder.) The British forced the Chinese to sign the humiliating Treaty of Nanking, which ended the First Opium War, on the deck of a Wadia-built ship, the H.M.S. *Cornwallis*. Belowdecks a Wadia craftsman impatient with colonial hypocrisy had carved an inscription: "This ship was built by a damned Black Fellow, A.D. 1800."

When I met Pheroza I was lonely and at loose ends in Mumbai, and looking for a place to stay. At the end of our second lunch, she offered me a room in her apartment. I accepted on the spot, and returned from the YWCA that evening with my bags. Pheroza refused payment for the room, and would accept only small house presents like shampoo and chocolate. Mallomars were her favorite. No matter what size the gift, she would hold it up appraisingly and exclaim, "Such a lot!"

At ninety Pheroza still took a walk every day along a route that passed by Doongerwadi, the verdant reserve where the corpses of deceased Parsis are left to excarnate on secluded cylindrical towers called *dokhma*. When I accompanied her, we could only walk around the outskirts; posted signs forbade non-Parsis from entering. Once a quick and ecologically friendly way to dispose of the dead, the practice of *dokhmenashini* has been threatened by a decline in India's vulture population. (The vultures' demise also put an end to a peculiar form of gentrification: bits of toes or fingers were rumored to appear on the terraces of luxury flats built near the site in the 1970s.) Publicity about the glut of corpses in the *dokhma* has swayed even devout Zoroastrians; Pheroza told me that she was no longer sure she would opt for a traditional funeral.

It was in response to the wishes of people like Pheroza that Khushroo Madon began, in 2009, to officiate for Parsis who chose to be cremated. Because the practice is unconventional, he and Fali are required to perform the first four days of prayers at the home of the deceased, rather than at Doongerwadi or an *agiary*. After that initial period, the prayers can continue at a fire temple, as they would for the soul of a person who had opted for *dokhmenashini*. "That means four days they punish the soul for getting the body cremated, and from fifth day they pardon the soul," Khushroo told me in Colaba. "Isn't it ridiculous?"

Not without a hint of boastfulness, Parsis often blame their population decline on the professional ambition and worldliness of their young people. Today, about 40 percent of Parsis in Mumbai marry outside the faith. In the United States and Canada, home to the Parsis' two largest diaspora populations—10,000 and 5,000, respectively—the figures are closer to 60 percent. In 1991, a Parsi woman named Goolrokh Contractor married a Hindu, Mahipal Gupta, and took his last name. The Guptas lived in Valsad, a coastal city north of Mumbai, where the local Parsi council had barred intermarried women from attending certain funeral ceremonies. In 2010, Gupta filed a petition with the high court in Gujarat to overturn the restrictions. To the surprise of many, however, the court ruled against her, declaring that Gupta "would be deemed and presumed to have acquired the religious status of her husband."

The Parsi community in Mumbai is divided about Gupta's case, which she has appealed to the Indian Supreme Court. Liberal Parsis often told me that accepting the children of marriages like Gupta's is the only way to stop the population decline. But a 2011 demographic study concluded that adding the children of intermarried Parsi women would not significantly change the community's population in Mumbai unless the fertility rate were to treble. Conservatives, meanwhile, fear that loosening the rules would open the floodgates to converts, who might





like a share of the community's enormous assets. (One B.P.P. trustee estimated the value of the real estate under their stewardship at 50 billion rupees, or \$780 million.) This worry persists even though a 1908 inheritance case involving the Tata family set a legal precedent that protects the community's assets from outsiders. The dispute, then, has more to do with the definition of what it means to be a Parsi—an emotional question for conservatives and liberals alike.

Though Gupta didn't request any privileges for her child, her challenge enrages traditionalists like Khojeste Mistree, the B.P.P. trustee who has most adamantly opposed efforts to expand the traditional criteria of Parsi identity. Mistree and his wife are independent scholars; his comfortable paunch and trimmed white beard give him a professorial look. He speaks in British-inflected English, with the weary patience of someone who feels perpetually misunderstood. Mistree was the teacher who provoked Fali in his high-school religion

class, and when I met him in his elegant apartment, on the opposite end of Khareghat Colony from Wadia House, he told me that he had little sympathy for Gupta's predicament. "In any other community she would've been beaten up by now—truly. Would she have the guts to do this if she were a Muslim?" Mistree laughed. "She wouldn't live to tell the tale, I'm sure."

Mistree studied Zoroastrianism at Oxford, and he took classes with Mary Boyce, a British scholar of the religion, at the University of London. He told me that without his academic training he might have strayed from the fold, and might even have married outside the faith. He now believes, however, that Parsis have a special responsibility as one of the only communities in the world being asked by their government to increase their numbers. For most of India, he told me, "it's *hum do, hamare do*." He was quoting a Hindi family-planning slogan—"We two, our two"—meant to discourage couples from having three or more chil-

dren. "I think it says a lot about the brand image of the Parsis that they actually want the community to increase. It's not that they want the religion to increase, but they want the bearers of the religion—namely the Parsis and Iranis—to increase." (Iranis are Zoroastrians descended from a wave of Iranian immigrants that started in the late nineteenth century, and are generally considered part of the Parsi community.)

Mistree's definition of a Parsi is narrow and ethnic. He told me that what disturbs him most about priests like Khushroo is the way they're diluting the population. "Iranian society, for that matter Aryan society, has always been patrilineal rather than matrilineal. So in Zoroastrianism, therefore, if we want to increase our community numbers, obviously Parsis should marry Parsis and Iranis and it shouldn't be anything else." He recognizes that there is an "agitation" among Parsi women who have married men from other religions: "Why are we treated as outcastes? Why are our children not accepted into the fold as being Parsis?" But Mistree believes that Parsis cannot afford that luxury. "We do not believe in gender equality. This is a Western idea that

Western-educated Parsis have picked up."

Mistree isn't wrong about the government's enthusiasm for the Parsi community. "The Parsis have always been the 'good minority' for India's rulers," the historian Sunil Khilnani told me, "for the Mughals, the British, and now for India's Hindu nationalists." Narendra Modi, who, along with his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, swept last year's elections, has embraced the Parsis—or at least their affluence—as a model for the rest of the country. In 2011, during his term as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi addressed a crowd at Udvada, where the sacred fire in the Parsis' holiest temple is said to have burned continuously since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India. "This is the community that doesn't want anything from government," Modi said, speaking in Gujarati, the language he shares with the Parsis. "They don't even want an election



ticket. This shows that their love is without condition, without any expectation." He praised the contributions Parsis have made in India, and said that the measure of any government's success is the approval of its minority communities. Ratan Tata, the chairman emeritus of the Tata Group, returned the compliment by endorsing Modi's government this April. He asked business leaders not to get "disillusioned and dissatisfied" as they waited for the reforms they were promised.

Many Parsis are pleased by the government's attention, even as they recognize that for Modi and his administration, talking about Parsis can be a way to avoid talking about Muslims. Modi has often seemed to set variable standards for his government's treatment of minorities. A few days before he met with Obama at the White House last fall, the prime minister was summoned by a federal court in New York to answer allegations that he shares responsibility for the religious riots in Gujarat that killed more than 1,200 people, mostly Muslim, in 2002, while he was chief minister. (An investigation commissioned by the Indian Supreme Court absolved Modi of blame in 2013, though his role in the riots remains in dispute.) And what many have seen as a lack of sympathy for Muslim concerns seemed especially clear in his prescriptions for the estimated 20 million undocumented migrants who had come to India from Bangladesh before he took office in New Delhi. Those who were Hindu should be welcomed, he declared in February of last year—"Where will they go? India is the only place for them"—but their Muslim counterparts got a different promise. If he was elected, he said, "these Bangladeshis better be prepared with their bags packed."

When Modi appointed Najma Heptulla that May, making her the only Muslim in his cabinet, he seemed to be sending a conciliatory signal. But Heptulla made an explosive claim on the day she was sworn in: "Muslims are not minorities, Parsis are." She said that India's Zoroastrians are "a minuscule minority that is so precariously placed that one needs to take care of their survival." By prioritizing the

needs of the relatively wealthy and educated Parsis over those of India's large Muslim underclass, Heptulla infuriated members of her own community. In the streets of New Delhi and Malegaon, a town northeast of Mumbai, Muslims burned their new minister in effigy.

At her office last summer, Heptulla told me that she had been misunderstood, and had meant only to say that Muslims were too numerous to be considered a minority in the technical sense. She admitted that "there are not many Muslims in the party"—the B.J.P. takes many of its ideological cues from its far-right parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, of which Modi is a lifelong member—but she pointed to the number of her co-religionists who had voted for the prime minister. (Eight percent of India's Muslims voted for the B.J.P., presumably as a protest against corruption in the incumbent Congress party.) "The country cannot fully develop if all the communities don't develop equally,"

Heptulla said. "We believe in transparency."

When I stayed with Pheroza Vakil in 2002, she told me an old story about the Parsis. According to legend, when the first Zoroastrians arrived at Sanjan, in Gujarat, the Hindu king told them that the village was already full and couldn't absorb any more citizens. In Pheroza's telling, the king sent a pot brimming with milk to illustrate his point. The Zoroastrian priests replied by stirring a spoonful of sugar into the pot and sending it back, along with a message: "We shall melt into your people without disturbing them at all, just as this sugar has melted into the milk."

Before I returned to Mumbai last year, I wrote to Pheroza's family to say that I often thought of her. I was amazed, a few days later, to get a reply saying that she was still alive at 102: "Of course her mind & body are v. frail but her vital organs seem to be ticking!"

Pheroza's family had attempted to persuade her to move in with them, to no avail. Wadia House looked the same as it had when I'd stayed there. I found her in her bedroom, in the

house where she'd lived for ninety-eight years. The room's French doors opened to the garden, and a portrait of her mother hung from the side of a mahogany armoire. A boom box sat on a shelf next to a stack of classical CDs, with a recording of *Tosca* on top.

A maid and a nurse helped care for Pheroza in her home, and her nephew and his wife came to see her every day. When visitors arrived, neighbors called down from their windows around the courtyard to ask how Pheroza was doing. Occasionally her family took her to the Willingdon Club, a colonial-era watering hole where she could sit in the garden. She'd been to Willingdon the day I visited, and her caretakers were surprised that she was still awake. I explained who I was, and how much it had meant that she'd once offered a stranger a place to stay. Pheroza looked at me with confused, milky eyes, and I sat there awkwardly until her sister-in-law broke the silence. "She's brought you chocolate."

As soon as I opened the fashionably unfancy box of artisanal chocolate, I decided that I should have gone with Mallomars. Pheroza looked at the small box of confections. "Such a lot," she said.

For a community that sees four deaths for every birth, the appearance of Parveen Pavri's twins in September was a big deal. Pavri didn't have much time to read the news stories, however, since her children were born prematurely and spent several weeks in the NICU. Pavri, who was committed to breastfeeding, kept detailed notes about their nursing and sleeping. "We have two rooms—a bedroom and a hall," she told me in January, laughing. She described her nights as a kind of dance that she performed with her husband as they moved between the bed and several mattresses, trying to keep the babies from waking each other up.

Pavri was exhausted but ebullient about her twins' arrival. At the same time, she thought that the 100 million rupees (\$1.5 million) the government had allocated for Jiyo Parsi



should be spent on counseling young people about marriage and family rather than on expensive fertility treatments. “There is no faith that we can do this if we want to,” she said. “In a community that does well professionally, confidence is sorely lacking in the personal sense. That is why we have so many single people. And that, I feel, is the real problem.”

**I**n the antiquity of its rituals, Zoroastrianism is comparable among monotheistic religions only to Judaism, but the community is so small that its reform and orthodox contingents sit in uneasy proximity. In February of this year, the B.P.P. finally concluded its long-running court case against Khushroo Madon, after a settlement that was negotiated without his direct involvement. According to the settlement, which was ratified by the Supreme Court in April, he will be allowed to perform ceremonies at Doongerwadi but only for members of his immediate family. Khushroo is planning an appeal. When I spoke to him recently, he said, “I will never be able to pray at Doongerwadi as I have no old immediate family members.” Even the chairman of the B.P.P., Dinshaw Mehta, criticized the decision, admitting that it discriminated against Khushroo. “To my mind it was a useless litigation not worth the amount of funds spent on it,” he told me. “We should be putting our hands in our own pockets if we want to fight this kind of thing.” Khojeste Mistree and his conservative allies, however, see the settlement as a vindication of the fundamental tenets of their religion. The court order also gives the trustees some license to ban particular priests from performing rites in the properties they oversee, ensuring that the debate isn’t finished. As the Parsi filmmaker Sooni Taraporevala has written, “When there are only two Parsis left in the world, they’ll still be sitting there and arguing about whether or not to allow conversions.”

There were times when even Fali Madon could switch from one extreme to the other as easily as he toggled between screens on his smart-

phone. Once, after I’d texted him to ask how important it was to his parents that he marry a Parsi woman, he wrote back: “Actually my own decision to marry a Full Parsi girl only. Or else will remain unmarried for my whole life.” He told me that “Zoroastrians are Aryans” and “A priest can’t marry an outcaste,” formulations that Mistree, his old religion teacher, might have approved. Another day, however, not long after he’d gone white-water rafting with ZYNG on the Kundalika River, south of Mumbai, Fali wrote to me to say that his parents were “fed up” with how long his search was taking, and that they didn’t mind him marrying a “decent” and “value based non-Parsi chick.” In that moment, at least, Fali seemed open to the idea.

Khushroo confirmed that he and his wife no longer felt they could insist on a Parsi bride. “In my time it was not so difficult,” he said. He had been set up with Fali’s mother by mutual acquaintances, who guessed they would get along because they were, in Khushroo’s words, “not modern. Not so aristocratic and all.” Khushroo laughed when he said this, while his wife teased him in Gujarati. “The last twenty-eight years, we are happy.”

One night last August, when I was exchanging messages with Fali, I asked him if being a priest made it more or less difficult to find a wife. “Most difficult, Madam,” he texted. It was evening in India, and Fali was alone in the *agiar*y. He was waiting to perform the ritual that would signal the fifth *geh*, which takes place not long after midnight. To pass the time he’d been reading a catalogue that he’d picked up at the Mercedes-Benz showroom on Hughes Road, down the street from the colony where Khojeste Mistree and Pheroza Vakil both lived. Fali had read the catalogue so often between prayers that he had memorized the features of most of the models, and his Facebook page was full of pictures of himself posing with some of his favorites. Now his parents and the watchman had gone out, and he was uneasy; he had locked the doors and windows as a precaution. “Makes me restless, angry. Lonely,” he wrote. “It’s damn quiet here.” ■

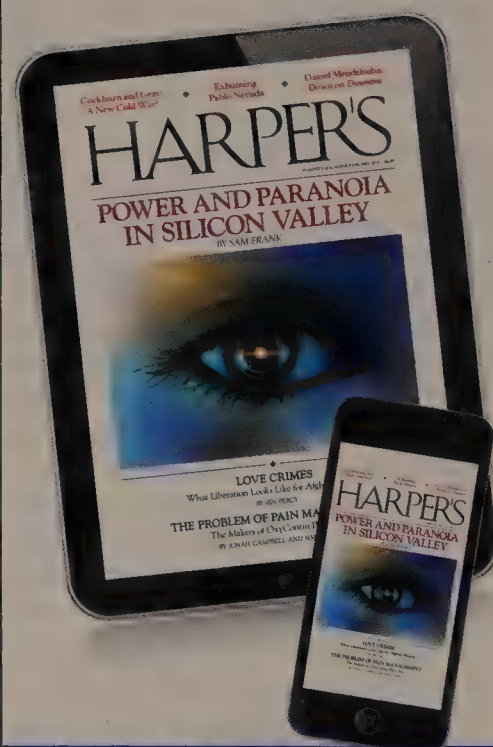
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**HARPER'S**  
MAGAZINE



# LEAP DAY

By Austin Smith

It was February and the rungs were cold as rods of ice. Beneath the suit he'd never had the occasion to get married in, Ernie Boettner was wearing his favorite flannel long underwear, the red sleeves of which stuck out past the cuffs. Despite the extra layer, he was still underdressed for climbing a silo in February in Illinois. He told himself that his senses had begun not to matter, but his teeth were chattering. He couldn't tell whether he was breathless from the cold or from the climb or both. Fifteen feet off the ground the ladder was encircled by a safety cage that continued all the way to the top. When he reached the cage, Ernie leaned back and felt the freezing metal through his clothing. He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked up and kept climbing.

There had always been rumors about Ernie Boettner and Chester Bradbury. The milkman talked of seeing Chester's veterinary truck sitting in the barnyard some mornings when he came to pick up the milk, but he'd heard that Ernie had trouble keeping his herd healthy—a rumor that Ernie himself had sown—so there was a good explanation as to why the veterinarian spent so much time over there. Luckily the homophobia of Pearl County was subtle, if only because it had so little occasion to manifest itself. In general,

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men saw what they wanted to see and ignored what they did not, including *Brokeback Mountain*.

Chester was already undergoing his second round of chemo when the movie came to the Pearl Theater. Ernie saw it five times, careful to disguise himself. He wore varying combinations of two pairs of glasses and three hats. In the end, these precautions were probably unnecessary. The stoned boy selling tickets hardly glanced at the customers, lost as he was in a reverie of his future life in Hollywood. And Ernie made sure to show up late, when the theater was already dark and the previews were rolling. He sat in the back row, and after the first time, he would leave while Ennis was still touching the bloody fabric of Jack's shirt. He would slip out through the side exit and walk briskly to his truck, his chapped hands in his pockets, crying because of what the movie had clarified in his life and vice versa. Then he would drive to the hospital.

Still, he couldn't help but feel that the guys down at the Bluebird Diner and at Morton Saint's Tap knew he'd seen the movie five times. That winter, *Brokeback Mountain* was practically all they talked about, which was interesting since none of them had seen it. They claimed they never would, though it was pretty clear to Ernie that once it came out on DVD they'd watch it one way or another, even if they had to drive a few counties away and open an account at a distant Blockbuster so they could rent it in anonymity. A few of the guys had written letters to the local

newspaper complaining that the movie had been shown within the city limits. There was even talk of boycotting the theater, but that fell silent when the next big movie came through.

In the midst of all this, Chester was dying in Pearl County Memorial Hospital. When Ernie got to his room, he would find Chester propped up against the pillows, reading a James Herriot book. Ernie would pull the curtains around the bed and sit down to tell him the story of the movie again. His telling varied slightly each time, but the end was always the same. He'd changed the original so that the two men lived happily together on the Twist family ranch, whipping the place into shape. They ran cattle and fixed up the buildings and made a living of it. In the last scene, Ennis and Jack lay in each other's arms against a couple of hay bales, gazing out from the barn loft at a classic western sunset as the camera slid between their heads into the distance. Distilled in the lie was the hopeless hope that this would be their ending as well, that Chester would kick the cancer and the two of them would finally not give a shit anymore what anyone thought and settle down at Ernie's place to live out their lives together.

On one of Chester's last days, he sat up in bed when Ernie walked in, and said, "I've had a vision of heaven."

Alarmed at how fast Chester was slipping, Ernie turned to call for the nurse, a tough young farm girl named Amber, but Chester gestured for him to



come closer. "Yes, Chester, what's heaven look like? I've always been curious."

"Heaven's a tavern. There's a fire burning no one has to tend to and the beer's free and you can drink it forever and never get too drunk."

"Is it like Morton Saint's, then?"

"Did you hear what I said? There's a fire and the beer's free."

"So it isn't like Morton Saint's."

"No. No, it isn't like Morton Saint's at all."

Chester died on the morning of February 28, 2007. Amber held Ernie while he wept into her shoulder. She said nothing, she just held him. Someone came into the room to do something technical and promptly left. When Ernie had cried himself out, he nodded and without even thanking her (because there was no need), he left as well.

He held himself together at the funeral, enough so that it seemed to everyone present that the two men had been no more than very good friends. This was a relief to many. If Ernie had thrown himself at the coffin, which contained not only Chester's body but the stethoscope he had used to listen to a thousand bovine hearts, it would have been too much for most of the crowd to handle. He bore the coffin with Chester's brothers and nephews and cousins (their names and relations to his lover a blur), and when it came time to take up the spade and toss a little soil in, he handled the task like any farmer would: with a practiced skill, as if he were burying a water pipe that had burst and been fixed.

Ernie believed everything Chester said, and that included his vision of heaven. Since the funeral, Ernie had pictured him sitting up there in some celestial tavern, drinking beer and getting just the right buzz off it forever, and good songs were always playing on the jukebox, and whenever any of the dead came up and tried to sit on the stool next to him,

Chester would say, "Sorry, saving this one for a friend."

A year and a day after Chester died, Ernie was halfway up the silo.

He tried not to think of himself jumping and falling, but imagined instead the February land rising up to embrace him.

But when he twisted around and peered through the cage and saw how high he already was, he was moved by pity for himself. He saw himself from a distance, a man in a dark suit and hat climbing his own silo, and why? Because he could not grieve openly for the death of his lover. Dying, he figured, was preferable to keeping his grief hidden.

Anyway, there would be no spring that spring. How could there be? The

cawing in the oaks below. The flowers would decline the invitation of the warming air and the rainy earth. It would always look just like it did on this evening.

When he reached the top, there was a balcony, a platform barely larger than a grill. The sides of the ladder curved up and formed a kind of banister around this platform, which led to a little door in the dome-shaped silo. The little door was open. From it exuded the warm, mashy smell of last fall's corn. He hadn't wanted to plant it, but did so because he always had. And because he'd planted it, he'd had to harvest it, and now it was all beneath him. Every kernel was vivid to him. He stood there like a king in a tower and gazed out over his kingdom. Then he took a deep breath and looked down at the ground that would rush up and put him to sleep as gently as Chester put things to sleep when this was what had to be done.

Having allowed himself to look down, holding his hat so that it wouldn't fall first as a kind of harbinger, he allowed himself to think of what people might say. His death would confirm what many had long believed to be true about the bachelor farmer and the bachelor vet. But what did it matter to him what they said? He'd be dead. By that logic, however, why die? If it wouldn't matter to him what they said when he was dead, why did it matter so much what they thought while he was alive?

There was still the fact that everything he saw reminded him of Chester. There was nothing down there that didn't reflect him, like a collusion of light and mirrors. Ernie didn't know anymore how to act, how to be. The simple ritual of making coffee stupefied him. Even the animals frustrated him now. He'd sold the milk cows after Chester died, but he was still responsible for the dog, the barn cats, fourteen steers, and one arthritic mare. What bothered him most was their hunger, which he'd always bowed before as though it were an idol. They would not grieve for him



first spring after Chester's death had been a mistake: the earth hadn't yet noticed that Chester was buried in it. Everything that blossomed had blossomed stupidly, every bird that sang had sung a stupid, foolish song, both the blossoming and the birdsong like the idiot laughter of children too young to understand they're at a funeral. But by now the earth had grown wise to this. He could see the snow still in the furrows, and knew no grass would pierce the ground, no birds would return from the warm south. The land would continue to be lorded over by the pigeons, who were, even now, describing invisible circles over the fields, and the crows



when he was gone. They would grieve that the man who fed them wasn't there to feed them. They would know only their hunger. Still, he hadn't been able to walk to the silo without filling the cats' dented pan with milk, and giving Suzanna an extra scoop of oats, and forking the steers' feed trough full of hay.

He looked down and was reassured that the land would indeed kill him. Seeing that this was true made his stomach double over. Again it helped him to imagine simply stepping forward into the air and the land itself doing the rest out of obedience and mercy. It would not merely cripple him, there was no danger of having to drool away the remainder of his years in a nursing home, unvisited and unloved, paralyzed so that he couldn't even lift a finger against himself. The land would obey him as it always had.

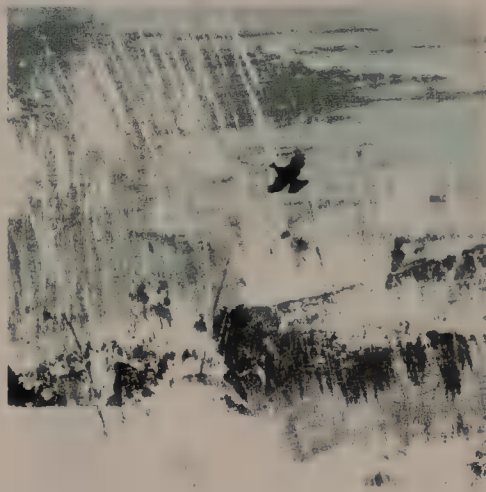
**S**unset, he'd promised himself. When the sun was completely gone, he would leap. It was a brutally cold clear blue day and there were no clouds to confuse him. The molten orange sun was just touching the tops of the trees far to the west, where the Mississippi was. It would be a little while, though, before it disappeared. But how arbitrary to wait for the sun to set. Why not jump now? So easy to step forward. One step. Now, were you supposed to take your hat off, as if entering a cathedral?

On the dome of the silo above and behind him landed a pigeon. Ernie wondered why it wasn't out there with the others, but the way the pigeon kept ducking its head like a boxer, it struck him that the bird was either ill or retarded. Realizing he'd never really looked at a pigeon, he looked at this one with something like wonder. He had worked under their rustling in the barn and cursed their droppings and even once upon a time delighted in blasting them down from the rafters where they liked to line up, warmly cooing, their soft bodies like loaves of bread cooling on a shelf. It wasn't until he met Chester that he had stopped killing them.

He was moved by the urge to touch this pigeon, the last living thing he could make contact with. But the bird was perched just too far away for him to reach, although not so far that he couldn't see its eyes, which appeared to be coated with a fine dust. To be held

was probably all it didn't know it wanted. But even if he could scurry up the side of the dome and reach it, the bird would probably fly away, and even if he caught it, he would be holding a pigeon on top of a silo, and that was not what he had climbed up there to do.

Damn the pigeon. Mite-ridden, salt-and-pepper-colored creature trying to save him. For a moment, he had a maddening thought. What if the pigeon was actually Chester, ignorantly assuming that Ernie wanted to live? He



clapped and screamed to scare the pigeon off, but it just shuffled around on the dome, lifting one orange foot and then the other like someone stepping into a bath and finding the water too hot. For the first time, it blinked, and Ernie realized the sun was gone.

He turned to the west and proved to himself that the sun was no longer there. It was daybreak in China. He would have to leap. He took his hat off, went to the edge of the balcony, and let it drop. The air seemed to put on the hat and then take it off, and it fell like a leaf falls, now fast, now slow, now straight, now in jaunty swoops. It fell right side up on the gravel. To Ernie it looked like a tiny black hole, something to aim for.

He felt sorry for the person who would find him. He pictured his body crumpled on the ground—how would it come to rest? Certainly not as perfectly as his hat had. Perhaps he would lie there like a sleeping boy, his hands curled into little fists, his blood on the gravel. His knees suddenly gave out like hinges. He sat down on the balcony, his legs dangling over the edge, as though he were perched on one of those summertime piers in the north woods. He remembered sliding slowly into the cold water, cold even in July. He remembered being

fascinated by the beautiful bodies of his older cousins. Unlike him, they dove right off the pier, trusting that the water was deep enough and not minding the cold. It was harder for him. He had to ease himself into it slowly.

He slid down until he had to hold on to the railing to keep himself from falling. To let go of the railing was to let go of his life. The cold rapped his knuckles like a pair of pliers. Soon it would rap them hard enough that he would simply let go. Out of curiosity, he writhed around and saw the pigeon and knew that it was just a pigeon and not Chester. It was a pigeon and it didn't care if he let go or not. The pigeon wasn't even looking at him anymore. It was looking out over the fields at the flock it couldn't join.

Ernie pulled himself up onto the balcony. He lay on his back and tried to weep but no tears came, and he wondered if they were frozen in the ducts. He wished he could tell himself that something miraculous had happened, that he had experienced some sort of revelation, but he couldn't, and he had to accept that he had been saved not by an act of grace but by the serene boredom and indifference of a retarded pigeon.

**H**e took the descent rung by rung, conscious that he was shaking and forgiving himself for this. When he reached the part of the ladder where the safety cage ended, he knew he had returned to the earth of pigeon droppings and of graves, where the only tavern was Morton Saint's Tap. Hopping down onto the gravel felt as strange to him as hopping down onto the moon must have felt to Armstrong. He walked over and retrieved his black hat, blew the dust off the brim, and went straight to his truck.

At first he had no idea where he was going, aware only of his hands on the wheel steering him somewhere and the black hat on the seat beside him. When he reached town, it was strange, as if he were dreaming. The first person he saw was a man coming out of Hardware Hank's turning his collar up against the cold, carrying a white plastic bag that looked like it was filled with knives. That there were people coming out of hardware stores at dusk on a day that didn't exist was remarkable to Ernie, almost funny. He thought for a moment



that this was what he had driven to town to see—to prove that, like the pigeon, the whole human race was indifferent to whether he lived or died, that had he jumped, this man would still have walked out of Hardware Hank's and turned his collar up against the cold. But then he was parking in front of Morton Saint's Tap and walking toward the door. He opened the door and stood on the threshold. The place was even louder than it was most Friday nights, as if everyone had decided to celebrate Leap Day as some sort of holiday. They all turned and looked at Ernie standing there in a charcoal suit with a black hat in his hands and then the place grew quiet.

"What's the big occasion, Ernie?" asked Bill Dietmeier, one of the men who'd written to the newspaper about *Brokeback Mountain*.

"I just spent the last hour on top of my silo, thinking pretty hard about jumping off it," Ernie said.

"Well," Bill said, "looks like you changed your mind."

"We're glad you did, Ernie," somebody chimed in.

"Now come on over here and let us buy you a beer or two," somebody else said. After a moment spent studying his hat, Ernie raised his head and said, "I want you all to know I loved Chester Bradbury."

"We know you did, Ernie," somebody said.

"Chester and I were lovers."

"I think a few of us figured that," somebody else said.

"I miss him like hell," Ernie went on, no longer in the same bar as they were.

"You're not gonna go back and hurt yourself now, are you?"

"Come on over here and have a beer."

But in his mind Ernie wasn't standing in the open doorway of Morton Saint's Tap in Pearl City, Illinois, letting all the cold air in. He was in another tavern and everyone looking at him was dead. Knowing that the beer would taste better than it ever had and humming along with a song only he could hear, Ernie Boettner let the door close and walked down to the end of the bar where no one was sitting. He sat down and put his black hat on the stool next to him so there would be no mistaking that he was saving it for someone. ■

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SOLUTION TO THE  
JULY PUZZLE

NOTES FOR "SIXES  
AND SEVENS":

Note: \* indicates an anagram.

M	I	S	F	I	T	D	E	T	A	C	H
E	N	H	A	N	C	E	X	C	I	A	O
D	R	I	F	T	E	N	T	O	M	B	S
I	E	N	D	E	B	A	R	S	E	A	E
U	N	D	E	R	D	R	A	W	E	R	S
M	A	I	N	L	Y	Y	M	A	D	E	R
S	M	G	N	O	E	G	A	M	E	T	E
A	N	T	I	C	L	E	R	I	C	A	L
A	I	I	S	U	N	N	I	S	E	I	O
R	O	B	O	T	I	C	T	O	N	K	A
G	T	E	S	O	N	U	A	N	C	E	D
H	E	T	E	R	O	P	L	A	Y	A	S

ACROSS: 11. homophone; 12. d-rift; 16. pun; 23. antic-L.(Eric)A.-l; 28. hidden; 29. \*.

DOWN: 2. reorder parts; 4. \*; 6. hidden; 7. aim-EE; 9. \*; 23. hidden; 24. t-I-bet; 26. 1-kea.

SIX-LETTER WORDS: a.) el nino\*; b.) mis(s)-F-it; c.); d.) ma(1)nly; e.) swam-is; f.) game-t(h)e; g.) den(a-r)y; h.) hetero\*; i.) sun-nis(rev.); j.) de-bars, pun; k.) detac\*-(photograp)h; l.) play-as.

SEVEN-LETTER WORDS: a.) de(C)en(C)y; b.) reloads\*; c.) Cabaret\*; d.) mediums\*; e.) rob-otic; f.) entombs\*; g.) shin-dig; h.) nuanced, homophone: new-on-st; i.) enhance\*; j.) am-riot\*-E.





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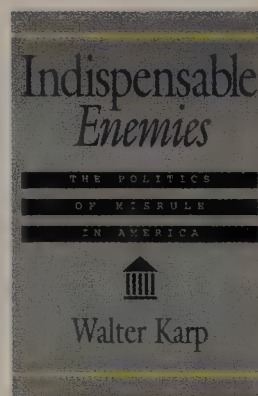
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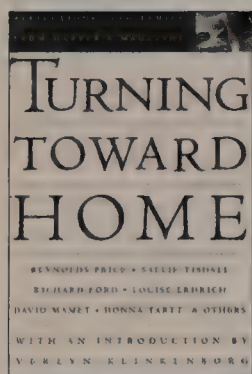
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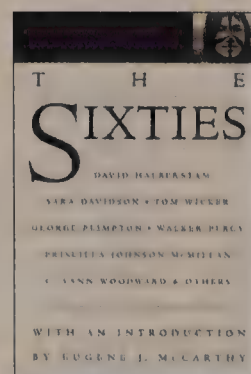
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## NEW BOOKS

By Joshua Cohen



Before Europe orientalized its eastern colonies, the Jew orientalized himself. Living in exile—amid the empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the four Islamic caliphates—he yearned for Zion: the homeland forever lost, the cradle of an identity forever idealized. “My heart is in the East—/And I am at the edge of the West” is how the predicament was put by Yehudah Ha-Levi, who wrote in Hebrew in twelfth-century Muslim Spain about Jerusalem under the yoke of the Crusaders. The poem, among the most famous in the Jewish canon, proceeds by questions—

How can I possibly taste what I eat?  
How could it please me?  
How can I keep my promise  
or ever fulfill my vow,  
when Zion is held by Edom  
and I am bound by Arabia’s chains?

—all of which raise the essential Jewish question: What does it mean to esteem that which you don’t, or only barely, know? Or, phrased another way: What happens when Zion doesn’t live up to its poem?

In 1140, after the death of his wife, the sixtysomething-year-old Ha-Levi retired from his medical practice and sailed for Egypt, his people’s former house of bondage.

From there, according to legend, he retraced the route of the Exodus, to the foot of the ruined Temple in Jerusalem, where he was trampled to death by an Arab on horseback. And so the quest to experience a metaphor became a metaphor itself: the Jew finally arrives in the land he’s always dreamed of, and promptly perishes. Is there any better summary of the anxieties of Zionism? Is there any better joke?

Paradox, futility, the veil dance between the imaginary and the actual, homesickness for a foreign or nonexistent home: these are the themes of Yoel Hoffmann, the greatest living writer in Israel—a country that appears in his work as a strange, vagabond mind-state bordered, roughly, by Transylvania, China, and Japan. Hoffmann was born in Transylvania, in 1937, and though he arrived in Mandate Palestine the following year, his true Zion lay farther east. In the 1960s, he made his pilgrimage. Even in Kyoto, where he studied at a Zen Buddhist monastery and obtained his doctorate at the city’s university, he longed for Kyoto. On returning to Israel, he taught East Asian studies at the University of Haifa and translated texts from Chinese and Japanese into Hebrew and English, including the koans of Masters Jōshū and Kidō and a landmark volume of *jisei*, the last verses monks write before dying or committing ritual suicide.

Hoffmann found his way to fiction only after fifty, publishing a succession of enigmatically nostalgic texts that sought to revive the mystical literature of European Jewry through the poetry and parables of Zen. In Hoffmann’s hands, these two traditions, separated by alphabets, languages, continents, and centuries, seem kindred if not continuous: both are full of anecdotes featuring pious figures—barefoot monks, bearded rabbis—who ask or are asked questions to which the only answer is a slap, a laugh, or a nonsense retort intended to reorient the senses.

Here’s an episode from Hoffmann’s translation of Jōshū (a.k.a.



Zhaozhou Congshen), the ninth-century Zen master of Bailin, China:

A monk asked, "Why is it that an outsider is not allowed to take over?"

Jōshū said, "Who are you?"

The monk said, "Enan."

Jōshū said, "What is your question?"

Enan asked, "Why is it that an outsider is not allowed to take over?"

Jōshū patted his head.

Jōshū's point seems to be that the very awareness of a hierarchy, in which Enan is a disciple and Jōshū a master, will prevent Enan from becoming a master himself. This lesson acquires an explicitly moral aspect in the Hasidic lore of eighteenth-century Russia:

The people of a certain city begged the Baal Shem Tov to force his disciple Yehiel Mikhal to accept the position of rabbi, which they had offered him. The Baal Shem Tov ordered him to accept, but he persisted in his refusal. "If you don't obey me," said the Master, "you will lose this world and the next world too." "Even if I lose both worlds," his disciple answered, "I won't accept what does not befit me." "Then take my blessing instead," the Master said, "because you have resisted temptation."

Both anecdotes frustrate commentary—the Buddhist story by embracing emptiness, the Hasidic by embracing goodness, humility, God. Hoffmann uses the same rhetoric, devoid of any instructional purpose, to write novels—or what his publishers insist on calling novels, though the ten volumes that have appeared to date read more like excavated fragments of a scrambled canon, a literature compiled from a Europe that Hoffmann never experienced and an Asia that was never his birthright. His fiction retains all the inconsistency, and therefore all the authority, of the religious texts on which they're based: references to the Nazi camps suddenly break off, as if to indicate lacunae; memories of geishas recur, but with conflicting details. Such glitches come to seem like sites of hermetic meaning available only to the adept.

Take this early chapter from Hoffmann's latest book, *MOODS* (New

Directions, \$15.95, [ndbooks.com](http://ndbooks.com)), in the reverentially irreverent translation of the poet Peter Cole (whose rendition of Ha-Levi is quoted above):

I remember things that happened in an empty building (which is to say, one they hadn't yet finished building) in Ramat Gan, in the fifties.

Then too (as now) legs were the principal thing. The world was full of legs of all sorts and there was movement in space. Someone—Ezra Danishevsky—said to me once: I want to be an elevator repairman (you can imagine the motion and its various directions).

In that (empty) building, a woman who's now seventy-four (if she's not dead) took off her dress.

In the next chapter Hoffmann narrates an encounter between a man, "most likely" named Nehemiah, and a French prostitute in a basement apartment in Paris. Later, he admits: "I too (Yoel Hoffmann, that is) once went like that down steps to a place where a French woman waited." Subsequent sections concern Hoffmann's father's Schaffhausen watch ("which wasn't removed even when he fell into a coma") and his aunt Edith (whose final word was *noch*, German for "another"). It's only nine chapters in that Nehemiah returns, or is explained:

I could write about how the Bible that the principal gave me at the end of eighth grade saved my life (it was in the pocket of my army vest and the bullet went into it up to the Book of Nehemiah) or, how, as though in an American movie, I went to the wedding of a girl I was in love with once and at the last minute etcetera. Which is to say, a bona fide story with plot twists and intrigue and an ending cut off like a salami (to keep it modern).

Hoffmann, of course, won't write anything like that story; instead he discusses psychoanalysis, one hand clapping, physics, and Gaza. Meanwhile, the connections that have been gestured at—between Nehemiah the prophet and Nehemiah as Hoffmann; between the woman in Ramat Gan and the woman in Paris; between the dying father's watch and the dying aunt's *noch*; and between the elevator and the stairs and the stand-alone legs and the circumcised

salami—remain suspended, uninterpretable: as present through their absence as Zion is in Israel.

**A**laa Al Aswany, the perennially best-selling and periodically censored Egyptian novelist, also writes for and about a fantasy country—namely, Egypt, or an Egypt that reads freely, an Egypt that accepts critique as something other than a pretext for imprisonment or torture. His novels, three of which have been translated into English, are national epics of the intimate: they remind their readers that every household hosts its own incarnations of fundamentalism, despotism, corruption, and graft.

His best novel, *The Yacoubian Building* (2002 in Arabic, 2004 in English), is as capacious as its eponym, and tenanted by a cross-purposed cross section of Cairene society: the wealthy (a philanthropist who's also a drug dealer) and the poor (the doorman's militant son), the intellectual (a homosexual Francophile) and the laborer (a crook seeking legitimacy as a crooked shopkeeper). Al Aswany previously worked as a dentist—his office was in the actual Yacoubian Building—and his next novel, *Chicago* (2007 in Arabic and English), is an acerbic tribute to the city where he trained. Another vast, mad cast—now of Egyptian students at the University of Illinois—negotiates post-9/11 racial profiling, violent policing, and other urban perversions of homeland security, all the while informing on immigrant Copts for the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate and discriminating against one another for having premarital sex.

So far, so legible: two novels about present-day Egypt, one set in Cairo, the other in the exchange-program Midwest. Now, with *THE AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF EGYPT* (Knopf, \$27.95, [knopfdoubleday.com](http://knopfdoubleday.com)), Al Aswany digs into the past—specifically into the *fin-de-siècle* ineptitude of Ottoman rule, during which the real power in Egypt was Britain. Al Aswany's Automobile Club—a classy, British-run, class-conscious facility that ensured only foreigners were licensed to drive in Egypt, and



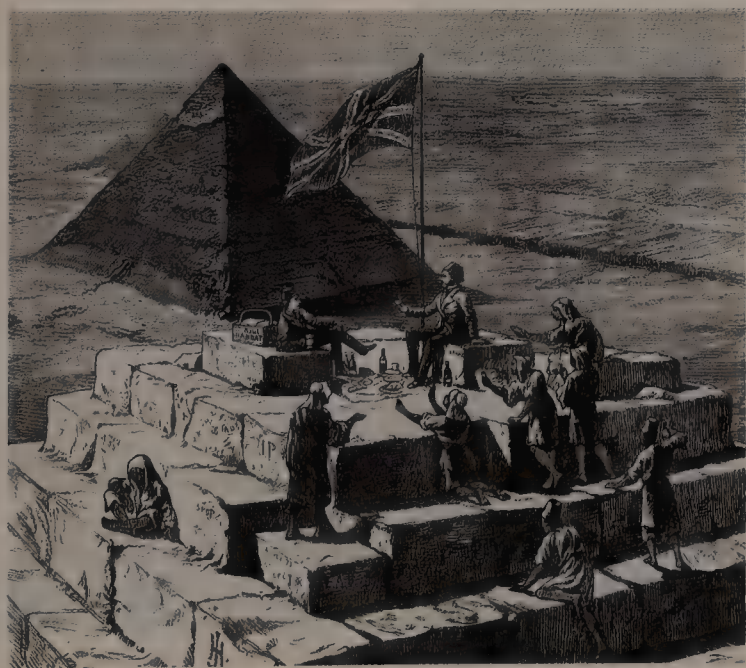
that when they did they were stoned on hash if not also drunk—provides a comfy leather armchair from which to observe the author's method. As in *The Yacoubian Building*, a venerable institution founded by or associated with the colonizers becomes a stage for the colonized. Characters pass in and out—some through the front door, some through the service entrance—chattering about Big Ideas (love, lust, death, enfranchisement) while embodying them in small foibles. James Wright, the director of the club, has an affair with Odette, a textile tycoon's daughter whose socialism he accepts only as style, or as an attribute of her youth, or of her Judaism. Rikabi the chef, Bahr the barman, Shakir the maître d', and Yusuf Tarboosh the casino manager are as proud of serving the pale-faced elite as they are of padding their bills. When it's time to complain about their pensions, or the pashas, or the bribes extorted by Alku—the Nubian chamberlain to the king, who gambles away his reign at the club—they gather at the neighboring Servants' Café and abuse its waitstaff and management.

Two families hold the plotlines together, and narrate them too: the Hamamas, who own a grocery, and the Gaafars, a prominent Upper Egyptian clan forced by a flailing economy to sell their land and move to Cairo. There, the Gaafar patriarch, Abd el-Aziz, finds em-

ployment as a club porter, is beaten after accidentally incurring the wrath of Alku, and dies—either from the beating or from the shame of it. Instead of compensating his family, the Automobile Club employs his sons, the dim-witted weight lifter Mahmud and Kamel, a Red revolutionary and part-time law student. Al Aswany hitches the turmoil that follows the death of their father to the monarchy's decline, and this doubling steers the action of the novel. In the absence of civic comity, there's family, and in the absence of family, there are alternate ties that bind: nationalist fronts, Communist cadres, Islamist cells, organized crime.

Kamel owes his own politicization to his boss—James Wright—a man convinced that “Egyptians are lazy, dirty, and liars too,” whose chief concern is “how much longer Britain will consider it a duty to bring civilization to the barbarians.” Between law seminars and shifts at the club, Kamel tutors Wright's actress daughter in Arabic, and when Wright suspects that they've fallen in love, he calls Kamel in for an audience. He claims to disapprove of the dalliance because of Kamel's race, though the reader is privy to another motive: the civilized Wright has been playing pimp, trying to pawn his expensive Mitsy off on His Majesty. Kamel leaves Wright's office primed for revenge. The next meeting he attends is of the nascent Wafd party—all-Egyptian, unofficial, underground.

On the agenda is a discussion of “the war against the independent trade unions being waged by the palace, the English, the minority capitalist parties, and the Muslim Brotherhood.” Kamel's heart is in Upper Egypt, but soon he's at the edge of Cairo, being interrogated in jail. How can he possibly taste what he eats? How could it please him? ■



British tourists in Giza, 1874 © Illustrated London News Ltd./Mary Evans Picture Library

# Turning Toward Home

## REFLECTIONS ON THE FAMILY FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Some of our most loving—and most difficult—relationships are with our parents, children, siblings, and extended families. These complicated relationships are the foundation of our society and our lives: they define our past, give us hope for the future, teach us to get along with others, and, often, provide excellent examples of how not to behave. The moving essays in *Turning Toward Home*, all of which were originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, gracefully explore these dynamics. Authors include David Mamet, Donna Tartt, Richard Ford, Sallie Tisdale, Louise Erdrich, and many more. Introduction by Verlyn Klinkenborg.

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# NEW ART

By Alice Gregory

“Museums,” the art historian Susanne Neubauer wrote, “are the place where things are transformed into objects.” In the case of *BASQUIAT: THE UNKNOWN NOTEBOOKS*, which is on view at the Brooklyn Museum through August 23, we’re forced to ask whether objects that are shown in an august institution are thereby transformed into art.

The eight notebooks on display were disassembled in the early Nineties by Gerard Basquiat, the artist’s father and the head of his estate, in collaboration with Larry Warsh, a New York-based collector, from whom they are on loan. (Brooklyn Museum conservators maintain that

on paper and canvas. (Selecting these couldn’t have been too difficult, as almost all of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work features text.) The inclusion of the larger works is meant to illustrate similarity rather than difference, a through-line connecting the contents of the notebooks to what the artist sold during his lifetime.

The show, which was organized by Dieter Buchhart and Tricia Laughlin Bloom, brings to mind DVD extras or the liner notes to deluxe editions of classic albums: bonus material, in this case, to the Brooklyn Museum’s critically acclaimed, blockbuster Basquiat retrospective in 2005. There’s nothing

from this exhibition having shed the designation “ephemera” once and for all.

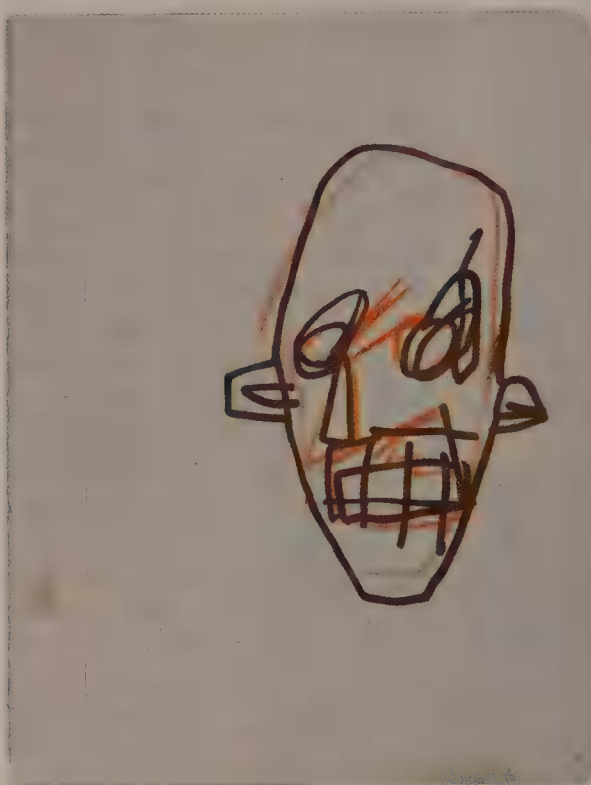
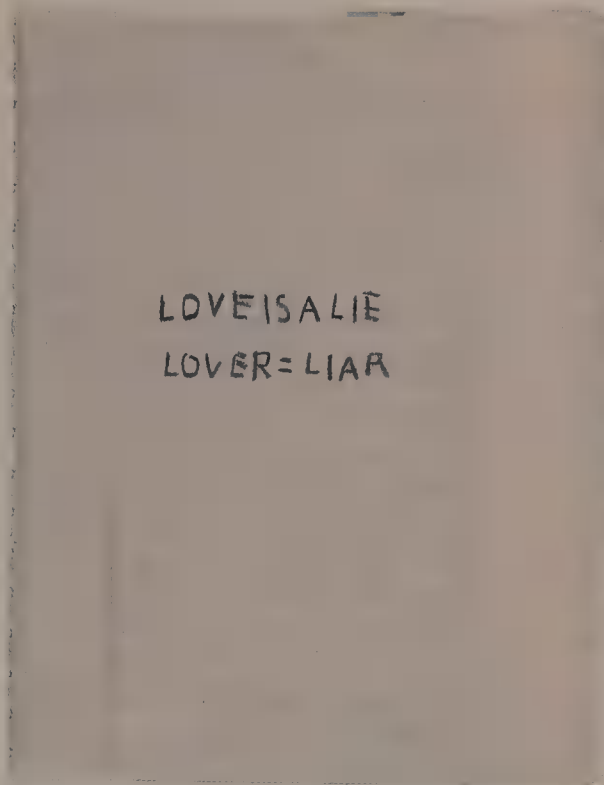
We pore over the sketches of Leonardo da Vinci in part because he left behind so few finished paintings. The same can’t be said of Basquiat, whose body of work includes 600 paintings and 1,500 drawings, especially impressive numbers considering how brief his career was. Of course, the museum couldn’t have curated a sequel, a retrospective of his second-best paintings, but knowing how many authenticated Basquiats exist in the world makes it difficult not to feel as though our ardor is being preyed upon.

Notebooks one through four, which date from 1980 and 1981, are the most densely scribbled in; after that, the contents peter out—a trajectory familiar to anyone who has attempted to self-record with consistency. There are some truly excellent pages: a sketch for what would become Basquiat’s Famous Negro Athletes series; a crowned totem pole emerging from what looks to be a sutured heart; nine consecutive sheets onto which he copied, as if in a trance, the table of contents from *Moby Dick*.

So much of Basquiat’s appeal lies in his time-traveling posturing: the adult impersonating the child who is in turn impersonating the adult. We can see it in his earliest graffiti—that copyright symbol—and it litters the notebooks: the trademark sign, the 1:1-scale copy of a Monopoly card, the amoebalike drawing of a wax seal beside the words “very official.” Even at

Basquiat’s most distracted and least intentional, the basic elements of his visual grammar—even mere marks—were executed with an inimitable hand. There isn’t an awkward gesture in the exhibition.

For all this affirmation of talent, there is nothing terribly revealing here. For



the sheets can easily be rebound.) The 160 pages are arranged in hip-level vitrines or mounted, one by one, on the walls. Most have a single line of text, or a few lines; a handful have sketches in ink or crayon. The show also includes about a dozen large but visually analogous works

wrong with wanting more—more art, more clues—but the hungry fan might wonder why all this *more* is appearing. I hope it’s not unduly cynical to point out how financially advantageous—to the estate, to Warsh, to auction houses, potentially—it would be if the notebooks emerged

Left: Untitled notebook page, circa 1987, wax crayon on ruled notebook paper. Right: Untitled notebook page, 1980–81, metallic ink and wax crayon on ruled notebook paper. All artwork by Jean-Michel Basquiat; licensed by Artstar, New York City; © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat



better or worse, the most thrilling inclusions are the pages that excite our basest enthusiasms: the moments of charming sloppiness (he misspells his girlfriend's name) and scraps of once-banal information that the confluence of time, economics, and good press has rendered important: the phone number of Sperone Westwater Gallery, a dashed-off reference to Francesco Clemente.

An exhibition of Basquiat's most mediocre words and images, one realizes, might have the opposite of its intended effect and instead diminish him in our eyes. Many of the pages are entirely forgettable. And while you can't exactly blame the curators for including them, the pages on display do create the impression that some kind of unseemly hero worship is going on. Is there nothing Basquiat touched that is anything less than holy?

A little more than a week after Basquiat died, in 1988, at the age of twenty-seven, appraisers from Christie's stormed his loft on Great Jones Street and found, among other things, finished and unfinished paintings, more than a thousand videotapes, a collection of antique toys, six synthesizers, a closet full of designer suits, and multiple bicycles. Perhaps in 2020 we will have Basquiat: The Unknown VHS Tapes.

There is a long history of this sort of posthumous second-guessing. Virgil's *Aeneid*, Kafka's *The Trial*, and, more recently, Nabokov's *The Original of Laura* were all originally destined for the fire. But at least their authors would have recognized them. These might be imperfect works, unfinished works, works that in their current form would mortify their makers, but they

are undeniably works of literature.

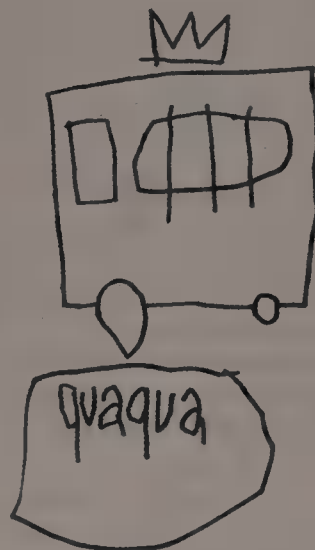
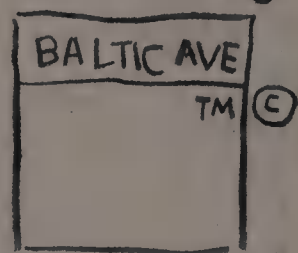
Such retroactive and remote anointing is far more difficult in the context of contemporary art, which for the past century has often been the product of speech acts. *I am an artist because I say I am. This is art because I say it is.* In the case of Basquiat's notebooks, it's not the artist's permission but his definition that is missing. As the years progressed and the notebooks multiplied, Basquiat remained diligent about neither writing nor drawing on both sides of the page. This consistency can be read as proof that he considered the notebooks worthy of exhibition. Or maybe he simply didn't like to work on a page where the ink had bled through.

We put a great deal of trust in visual artists to correctly distinguish their art from their nonart; it's one of the most basic ways in which they express their vision. To retroactively call Basquiat's notebooks art steals his agency—he could have displayed them had he

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wanted to—and changes our perception of the authenticated work. But to assert that the notebooks are definitely nonart is also, obviously, impossible.

Maybe that's the meaning of the show's strange subtitle: only Basquiat could settle this debate, and his verdict is unknown. The curators pose the question anyway. Every answer is potentially wrong, which is as good a reason as any for an artifact—art or not—to be held up for examination. ■



# FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

## What's missing in contemporary war fiction

By Sam Sacks

Discussed in this essay:

*A Big Enough Lie*, by Eric Bennett. Triquarterly. 296 pages. \$17.95.  
nupress.northwestern.edu.

*The Yellow Birds*, by Kevin Powers. Back Bay Books. 256 pages. \$14.99.  
hachettebookgroup.com.

*Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, edited by Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton. Da Capo Press. 256 pages. \$15.99. dacapopress.com.

*Redeployment*, by Phil Klay. Penguin Books. 304 pages. \$16. penguin.com.

*Fives and Twenty-Fives*, by Michael Pitre. Bloomsbury. 400 pages. \$17.  
bloomsbury.com.

*The Watch*, by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya. Hogarth. 318 pages. \$15.  
crownpublishing.com.

Toward the end of 2012, when the first major fiction by veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began to be published, the response from the literary world fell somewhere between celebration and relief. The books seemed to herald a sorely needed reckoning. After years of awkward silence, here, finally, were writers willing to urge a complacent and distractible public to confront the tragedies of the Terror Wars.

Critics and commentators who sensed the importance of this transformation were keen to enlist these veterans into the ranks of classic war writers. The 2014 National Book Award citation for *Redeployment*, Phil Klay's story collection, argued that "if all wars ultimately find their own Homer, this brutal, piercing, sometimes darkly funny collection stakes Klay's claim for consideration as the quintessential storyteller of America's Iraq conflict." In an appreciation of Klay and others, including Michael Pitre, the author of the novel *Fives and Twenty-Fives*, and Kevin Powers, who won the 2013 PEN/Hemingway award for *The Yellow Birds*, Michiko Kakutani wrote in the *New York Times*:

All war literature, across the centuries, bears witness to certain eternal truths: the death and chaos encountered, minute by minute; the bonds of

Sam Sacks is an editor at Open Letters Monthly and writes the Fiction Chronicle for the Wall Street Journal.

love and loyalty among soldiers; the bad dreams and worse anxieties that afflict many of those lucky enough to return home. And today's emerging literature ... both reverberates with those timeless experiences and is imprinted with the particularities of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In *The New Yorker*, George Packer also saw continuity between this crop of young veteran authors and their forebears, but he emphasized something different: the healing role that fiction can play after the fighting is over. Calling to mind Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien's assertion that "stories can save us," Packer pointed to the feeling of communion that these books can inspire: "Some will begin to recognize their own suffering in the stories of others. That's what literature does."

Modern war writing is a strange thing to praise, because such praise ennobles the account while deploring the event. Time and distance blunt this quandary—most of us, if we are honest, are happy that there were battles at Agincourt and Borodino because of the literature they inspired—but when the dead are barely cold, it's necessary to keep two sets of books. This is why a familiar language of acclaim is always invoked: shared suffering, eternal truths, the passion play that transmutes pain into collective redemption. War is hell, but its themes make critics purr.

This division awkwardly mirrors the distant, unreal nature that today's conflicts have for most American civilians. The public's unprecedented disconnection from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan—wars waged by a volunteer army and funded with borrowed money—has made it all the more eager to genuflect before the writing that has emerged from these conflicts. As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption, veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian. As Private Bartle, the traumatized narrator of *The Yellow Birds*, says: "Nothing is more isolating than having a particular history. At least that's what I thought. Now I know: All pain is the same. Only the details are different."

All pain may be the same, but all wars are not, and in the search for reconciliation that distinction has gone missing. Why did we fight these wars, and what were we trying to achieve? Did we succeed or did we fail? What consequences have we wrought on the countries we attacked? What, if anything, have we learned? Questions like these rarely come up in recent war fiction, because they lie outside the scope of personal redemption, beyond the veteran's expected journey from trauma to recovery. As one of Klay's narrators puts it:

The weird thing with being a veteran, at least for me, is that you do feel better than most people. You risked your life for something bigger than yourself. How many people can say that? You chose to serve. Maybe you didn't understand American foreign policy or why we were at war. Maybe you never will. But it doesn't matter.

To be sure, Klay is not presenting this attitude without irony, but it's representative of a genre that scrupulously avoids placing the Terror Wars within a larger political or ideological context. Redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly these wars were about. Stories can save us, as O'Brien said, but they can also let us off the hook.

The working template for the contemporary soldier's story was set almost immediately



with *The Yellow Birds*. *Fire and Forget*, a 2012 anthology of short stories by returning veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, appeared soon after. In his introduction, Colum McCann writes that the authors' words "eclipse war" and "bring back the very humanity we have always desired." The power of these stories, he suggests, comes from the way in which they transcend their contexts. It's striking that fewer than half the stories in *Fire and Forget*, which was edited by Iraq veterans Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher, are about the fighting itself; most concern characters coping with post-traumatic stress or struggling to reacclimate to civilian life. In *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle returns home isolated and suicidal, ashamed "on a cellular level" by what he has seen and done in Iraq.

The stories also share a consistent perspective. They view the war from the restricted point of view of individual characters, to whom no larger picture of the conflict is visible. The narrator of Jacob Siegel's "Smile, There Are I.E.D.'s Everywhere," which opens *Fire and Forget*, explains,

For us, there had been no fields of battle to frame the enemy. There was no chance to throw yourself against another man and fight for life. Our shocks of battle came on the road, brief, dark, and anonymous. We were always on the road and it could always explode. There was no enemy: we had only each other to hate.

*The Yellow Birds* turns on the desertion and death of Bartle's closest friend, but the scenes set in Iraq are curiously ethereal. Powers, a former Army combat engineer, has also written poetry, and he seems torn between indirect, lyrical evocations of the war zone—a desert firefight is "hazy and without sound, as if it was happening underwater"—and raw, confessional outpourings about Bartle's feelings of blame and despair.

In his author's note in the paperback edition, Powers writes that his intention

was "to create a cartography of one man's consciousness." The same could be said of almost all contemporary war fiction: to hear these books tell it, the soldier's consciousness is the field of battle. You find the same close focus throughout the lengthening list of fiction by veterans: *Fives and Twenty-Fives*; *The Knife*, by Ross Ritchell; *War of the*



*Encyclopaedists*, which was co-written by Gavin Kovite and Christopher Robinson; and, most recently, *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them*, by Jesse Goolsby. (That these books are all by men shows how traditional the veteran's narrative remains. There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached.)

The first-person narrators in Phil Klay's well-crafted *Redeployment* share this self-involvement. The running theme of the book is uncertainty, both in the nature of combat and in the stories that people tell about it. Klay, a Marine Corps veteran, occasionally widens his lens to examine the cruelty and dysfunction of the war at large. "Ten Kliks South" reveals the workings of an artillery unit whose target areas are more

than six miles away, and who therefore have little idea how many people they've killed or who those people are: "Wherever we hit, everything within a hundred yards, everything within a circle with a radius as long as a football field, everything died." The follies of nation-building are exposed in the Hellenesque "Money as a Weapons System," which is set within the compound of an incompetently run Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Ultimately, however, *Redeployment* returns to the confined viewpoints of individual soldiers who can't comprehend what they've experienced. "You can't describe it to someone who wasn't there, you can hardly remember how it was yourself because it makes so little sense," says one of Klay's characters. This sort of anxious metafictional meditation seems to have become almost compulsory for contemporary chroniclers of war. Here is Siegel:

I got up every day after Annie went to work and tried to make sense of what happened over there, how it all fit together, why it counted for so much if I wasn't even sure how to add it up. . . . I couldn't write the things that haunted me for fear of dishonesty and cheap manipulation, which I blamed on not being haunted enough.

Pitre:

It's not smart for me to tell stories. Makes people uncomfortable. . . . Even the memories that seem funny in my head come out sounding like the summer vacation of a psychopath.

Powers:

What happened? What fucking happened? That's not even the question, I thought. How is that the question? How do you answer the unanswerable? To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery.

**W**hy are so many veterans telling the same kind of war story? The authors of these books share something else besides



military service. The editors of *Fire and Forget* met in NYU's Veterans Writing Workshop. Michael Pitre studied creative writing as an undergraduate. Kevin Powers, Ross Ritchell, Jesse Goolsby, and Phil Klay are all M.F.A. graduates. (The authors of *War of the Encyclopaedists* split the difference: Gavin Kovite is a former infantry-platoon leader; Christopher Robinson has the fiction degree.) Nearly all recent war writing has been cultivated in the hothouse of creative-writing programs. No wonder so much of it looks alike.

This, at least, is the suggestion that Eric Bennett makes in his new novel *A Big Enough Lie*, the first satirical treatment of contemporary war fiction and the classroom politics that produce it. Bennett is himself a graduate of the oldest and most revered of these programs, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and he earned a Ph.D. studying the history of writing programs after World War II. His articles and the forthcoming monograph built from them, *Workshops of Empire*, make for a fascinating complement to his novel. As with most polemics against M.F.A. culture, they carry a whiff of personal grievance that helps animate the critique.

Bennett's account goes like this. The Iowa Writers' Workshop began in 1936, but it wasn't until the end of World War II that it and a few other programs rose to prominence. The G.I. Bill flooded universities with repatriated soldiers, and many of the earliest workshop enrollees were veterans. Several programs had a distinctly military feel. Iowa's classes were held in Quonset huts along the Iowa River. Wallace Stegner, who founded Stanford's writing program in 1946, sought to replicate the camaraderie of an Army squadron, and he hoped to apply his students' military discipline to the craft of writing.

But what did this craft entail? Bennett contends that the guiding force behind the "workshop method" that we know today was Paul Engle, the Cold Warrior poet and administrator who directed Iowa's writing program between 1941 and 1965. Engle had a keen business sense—he attracted the support of wealthy donors like the Rockefeller Foundation by convincing them that the writers' workshop was a significant

staging ground in the culture wars against fascism and Communism. The program, he argued, would foster literature that opposed demagoguery and collectivism and celebrated individuality and self-expression—"the singular, the personal, the anomalous, and the particular," as Bennett puts it.

Ernest Hemingway was Engle's paradigm. Bennett cites a 1929 letter by the poet Allen Tate that, in praising Hemingway, extolled precisely the qualities that Engle hoped would define the discipline of creative writing:

Whether or not you like the kind of people he has had to observe, the very fact that he sticks to concrete experience, to a sense of the *pure present*, is of immense significance to us. Hemingway, in fact, has that sense of a stable world, of a total sufficiency of character, which we miss in modern life.

Hemingway's fiction was grounded in the immediate perceptions of his characters. It was anti-institutional, and subordinated broad ideas to finely described moments. Engle's workshop pedagogy therefore elevated small, glistening gems of subjective experience over sprawling, panoptic structures such as John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. As Bennett writes, "Universities privileged the particular over the universal, the sensory over the ideational, the concrete over the abstract."

Whatever the political origins of the modern writing program—Bennett traces funding from the State Department and the CIA—the aesthetic he describes is spot-on. Engle's preferred style found confirmation in *Writing Fiction* (1962), an influential student handbook by R. V. Cassill, a onetime Iowa professor and the founder of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. The self, Cassill said, remained the first and best source for a writer's material:

As soon as we have learned something about our craft we are tempted to turn from concentration on our own experience to the public world of great events—to write about spies and congressmen. But the first commandment is to go back stubbornly to our own fields.

From such an ethos emerge the well-worn axioms of the creative-writing program: "Find your voice." "Write what

you know." This pluralism remains foundational to the workshop philosophy, which produces writers dedicated to exploring their own personal stories. These tend to be rooted in identity—social class, ethnicity, a defining childhood crisis, or anything else from an author's background that seems to set them apart. For veterans, military service unquestionably constitutes that distinguishing characteristic.

Tim O'Brien is by far the most important of the type. His debut novel, *Northern Lights*, from 1975, is a pastiche of *The Sun Also Rises*, but in later work O'Brien applied Hemingway's precision and concreteness to the psyche, making explicit the thoughts and emotions that Hemingway had left implied. Along with the physical objects enumerated in "The Things They Carried," the best-known story to come from the Vietnam War, O'Brien's soldiers shoulder their hopes, their fears, their guilt, and their remorse. This expanded sense of interiority was partly a response to the abstract nature of combat in Vietnam. O'Brien has said that he encountered the Vietcong only once during his tour of duty: "All I saw were flashes from the foliage and the results, the bodies." With the forms of battle now faceless and remote—sniper fire, booby traps, air strikes—and the intentions of the war either forgotten or discredited, O'Brien burrowed inward to locate the bedrock of the real. His descriptions of the Vietnamese jungle frequently blend together with his soldiers' dreams and fantasies, and he seems less interested in the specifics of the fighting than in the catharsis of the telling. His much-anthologized "How to Tell a True War Story" is regarded as both a sensitive and self-aware classic of war fiction and a useful tool for writing instruction.

In developing his technique, O'Brien also carved out a niche. In *The Program Era* (2009), a shrewd and acerbic study of postwar fiction, Mark McGurl suggests that war writers had become a distinct "minority culture" by the time of Vietnam. O'Brien, he writes, is a "Veteran-American writer, in the sense that the psychic wounds inflicted on him in his year of combat have become foundational to a career in the same way that [Philip] Roth's Jewishness has." The



demotion of war writing to a discrete subgenre reflected the increasingly remote role the military had come to play in most people's lives. But McGurl suggests that the tendency to define writers by their identities had another ironic and insidious effect—it prompted greater homogenization. Although the subjects of program writing were superficially diverse, the narratives became ever more uniform. Story after story concerned an individual's attempts to overcome adversity, to pass through the pain and isolation of his circumstances and arrive at some universal understanding. For a time, focusing on "biographical singularity" was a way to rebel against institutions like the military or the middle class, Bennett writes. "But what happens to the rebel if everyone follows him?"

Bennett's *A Big Enough Lie* is a disgruntled send-up of exactly this kind of identity politics. It focuses, of course, on a would-be writer, John Townley, whose artistic and romantic ambitions lead him into a bizarre masquerade. As a student in a fictionalized version of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he pretends to be a disabled Iraq War veteran. To fill out this persona he purloins the stories of a childhood friend who fought in the army. More audaciously, he borrows details from the life of an American soldier who is presumed dead after a nationally reported kidnapping in Babylon. The shocking memoir Townley fabricates—its chapters intersperse Bennett's narrative—is championed by an Oprah-like talk-show host, who transforms him into a celebrity and makes it all the more probable that he'll be exposed as a fraud.

There's a clever two-way game going on here. On the one hand, Bennett gets to smuggle his own first-person war narrative into publication, despite his lack of military credentials. On the other, he is able to assail the fetishization of authenticity among publishers and readers, and the patronizing celebration of books that conform to our preconceived expectations about suffering and heroism. Throughout the novel, Townley expresses a frustrated yearning for a literature that offers more than a confirmation of lived experience—he wants conceptual or philosophical or visionary fictions that can access something other than received opinions. "What if there are

truths we can absorb only through hypothesis and imagination?" he thinks. "What if there are powers of sympathy exercised only by exposure to the untrue?"

"A novelist is an artist, and an artist is somebody with a certain relationship to the world, an imaginative one, a subversive one. A clever one," says another of Bennett's characters. "He plays hypothetical pranks and has all the freedom in the world to do so." Bubbling throughout *A Big Enough Lie* is an exhortation to reconsider the qualities we have been trained to value in literature. What if invention and exploration were more esteemed than testimonies of personal struggle? What might the novel be capable of—aesthetically and politically—if it broke out of its obsessively curated pigeonholes of first-person experience?

Yet Bennett, too, struggles to escape the hall of mirrors that turns every novel into a study of itself—this is, after all, a book about someone frustrated with M.F.A. programs written by someone frustrated with M.F.A. programs. The workshop doctrine of self-expression is hard to shake off.

If veterans played a crucial part in the origins of the writers' workshop, the workshop has since returned the favor. Dozens of programs created specifically for veterans, like the one at New York University where many of the contributors to *Fire and Forget* first met, have emerged in recent years. Many veterans have reported finding the workshops more helpful and inviting than the group-therapy sessions provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. In an age when the isolation of returning soldiers is more pronounced than at any time in American history, it's proved to be an effective, and necessary, service.

There is an important distinction between writing for yourself and writing for the public. Yet the difference between private, therapeutic writing by recovering veterans and the recent spate of published war fiction often feels like one of degree rather than of kind. Individually the depictions of war presented by these latter books can be moving, but their cumulative effect has been to create a pitiable image of American soldiers that generates a condescending kind of

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# THE SIXTIES:

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE DECADE FROM HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Introduction by  
Eugene J. McCarthy

Relive the decade that changed our lives—Vietnam, Oswald, Cassius Clay, Castro's Cuba, civil rights, pot, the 1968 election ...

From a heart-wrenching war that tore America apart to the political turmoil that destroyed our illusions of innocence. From the music and art that made us think and feel in new ways to the activism and experimentation that changed American society forever. *The Sixties* reviews that decade of change, focusing on politics, the civil rights movement, youth culture, and much more from the unique and far-sighted perspective of the nation's oldest monthly magazine. It includes profiles, interviews, commentaries, and essays by some of the best writers of the '60s era, including **George Plimpton, Walker Percy, Joe McGinnis, David Halberstam, Richard Hofstadter, C. Vann Woodward, Priscilla Johnson McMillan, Sara Davidson, and Louis Lomax.** Introduction by **Senator Eugene J. McCarthy,** presidential peace candidate of 1968.

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sympathy but rarely any respect: bewildered, ineffectual, cynical, destructive, incapable of distinguishing between civilians and the enemy, and intensely preoccupied with their own sense of victimhood. In the most plaintive of Phil Klay's short stories, "Prayer in the Furnace," a company chaplain is approached by a Marine who shows him a photograph of a small Iraqi child setting down a box:

"That kid's planting an I.E.D.," he said. "Caught in the fucking act. We blew it in place right after the kid left, because even Staff Sergeant Hauptert didn't want to round up a kid."

"That boy can't be older than five or six," I said. "He couldn't know what he was doing."

"And that makes a difference to me?" he said. "I never know what I'm doing. Why we're going out. What the point of it is. This photo, this was early on when I took this. Now, I'd have shot that fucking kid. I'm mad I didn't."

The equivalence between American soldiers and helpless children runs throughout contemporary war fiction. But whether or not it's an accurate depiction, the narrative possibilities offered by the analogy are extremely confining. If a soldier kills a non-combatant—an event that occurs in many of these books—the story rarely explores the larger meanings and ramifications of that act. The emphasis inevitably narrows to the soldier's ability to come to terms with his pain.

There are signs that veterans themselves are growing frustrated by these conventions. In an essay published this January in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Roy Scranton, one of the editors of *Fire and Forget*, threw a few sharp elbows at fiction that coluded in what he called the "myth of the trauma hero," a story arc that traced an idealized soldier's journey from innocence to trauma to recovery. Writers, he argued, had become attuned to the myth's marketability and sometimes seemed "eager to capitalize on the moral authority it offers."

The workshop model, with its reverence for small, human moments of inner transformation, doesn't allow for many other storytelling options. "Write what you know" is a difficult mantra when you know so little. In a prescient essay from 1973, Alfred

Kazin asked the question that continues to bedevil war literature:

But what to do when *individuals* at war are no longer interesting, when the only real protagonist at war is the nation-state, the war-state, the war-leaders ... ? The contemporary novel, haunted by the power of impersonal structures, still has no practice in employing wholly impersonal characters. General Westmoreland, no doubt in disgust with American troops, anticipates a time when war will be completely automated.

The automated war is nearly upon us, and it threatens to make the fiction writer's classroom lexicon anachronistic. Today, Hemingway's "pure present" is mediated by technology. "Concrete things," which to Wallace Stegner were the alpha and omega of human truth, have been replaced by virtual images. When enemies are seen at all, it is through night-vision goggles or computer screens that make them look like video-game avatars. Drones do most of the killing, but drones don't write confessional, first-person novels to tell us what it's like.

Fortunately, the novel is an adaptable art form. Attending to the singular and the personal—to what Henry James called the "present palpable intimate"—is only one of the things it can do well. It can also place individuals within larger structures of meaning and operate from impersonal, godlike distances. It can create earthy social networks, as in the work of Dos Passos, Mailer, and Elsa Morante. It can unspool philosophical theses, as in Tolstoy and Vasily Grossman. It can be political, allegorical, panoramic, kaleidoscopic, and epic. Contra R. V. Cassill, it can even be about spies and congressmen—spies and congressmen being an integral part of the world.

One obvious route out of the cul-de-sac of personal experience is to inhabit the perspectives of America's enemies or allies. The liveliest writing in Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives* comes in the sections devoted to an Iraqi interpreter, whose ambivalent and somewhat bemused relationship with the U.S. infantrymen casts the American misadventure in a sardonic light. In *Green on Blue*, Elliot Ackerman, a former Marine Corps Special Operations team leader,



chose to concentrate almost entirely on the Afghans with whom he served. The novel is about an Afghan soldier who joins an American-funded army division in order to avenge his brother, who was wounded in a Taliban bombing. The plot allows Ackerman to frame the nebulous global war on terror as a local conflict defined by the tension between family and community loyalties.

Long-proscribed concepts like loyalty, honor, and courage reemerge in the Indian-born writer Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya's *The Watch*, which reprises the story of *Antigone* at an American military outpost in Afghanistan. Roy-Bhattacharya did not fight in the war, and he grants himself powers of omniscience that many veterans seem reluctant to claim, moving confidently between the points of view of American soldiers, local Afghans, and a Northern Alliance translator. The author's deft manipulation of a large dramatis personae reinforces the sense of classical tragedy and stops the novel from being sucked toward the abyss of subjectivity.

Without this sort of complex and imaginative approach to the experience of war, American fiction is in danger of settling into the patterns of complacency that smoothed the path to the Terror Wars in the first place. The publishing status quo, which rewards soldiers who chronicle their pain with book prizes and extravagant blurbs, bears an unsettling resemblance to a volunteer army that allows the public and the intellectual classes to outsource their accountability and guilt. Proclaiming that veteran authors have transformed war into Homeric masterpieces filled with timeless truths is a way of excusing our own indifference. Extolling literature for its healing properties after a period of national trauma looks a lot like congratulating ourselves for having gotten through a bad time with minimal unpleasantness. Meanwhile, the relationship between the public and the military is more remote than ever, and our memory of the reasons we launched wars against Afghanistan and Iraq has grown correspondingly thin. One of the jobs of literature is to wake us from stupor. But in matters of war, our sleep is deep, and the best attempts of today's veterans have done little to disturb it. ■

# OLD POISON, NEW BATTLES

## The ongoing struggle for voting rights

By Randall Kennedy

Discussed in this essay:

*Give Us the Ballot*, by Ari Berman. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 358 pages. \$27. fsgbooks.com.

**T**he Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was ratified in 1870, declares that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged ... on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." It also stipulates that "Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." For a century after the collapse of Reconstruction, officials sworn to uphold the Constitution used obstruction, evasion, intimidation, and fraud to negate the amendment and to effectively nullify the political participation of black citizens. White primaries excluded blacks from any role in selecting Democratic Party candidates—tantamount to eliminating black political influence altogether in Southern states, which were subject to one-party rule. The infamous "grandfather clause" raised literacy requirements for voting but created an exception for those whose forebears had been eligible to vote in 1866. The obvious purpose was to take the vote away from poor, unlettered blacks while sparing poor, unlettered whites. Racial gerrymandering was another widely used device for disfranchisement: in 1957, for example, the legislature of Alabama redefined the electoral boundaries of Tuskegee in such a way as to disqualify as voters all but four or five of its four hundred registered black voters, a task it accomplished without disturbing even a single white voter. State officials also purged blacks discriminatorily from voter rolls and excluded them with laws that authorized registrars to assess whether a potential voter could suit-

ably "understand and explain" a given constitutional provision.

Courts struck down these and other unconstitutional voter-suppression efforts, but litigation was time-consuming. Local officials often disregarded adverse judgments or substituted new schemes as quickly as old ones were invalidated. Meanwhile, private citizens deployed informal obstacles. Bosses threatened to fire black employees who registered to vote. There was also the ever-available weapon of state-tolerated violence. In 1955, in Belzoni, Mississippi, George Lee was murdered after he refused to desist from urging blacks to register to vote. In 1961, in Liberty, Mississippi, Herbert Lee—no relation—was murdered on account of his voting-rights activism. (The local sheriff, who claimed the cause of death was a traffic accident, suggested that the buckshot found in Lee's face during an autopsy was loose dental fillings.) In 1965, in Marion and Selma, Alabama, Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and Viola Gregg Liuzzo were murdered because they had protested black disfranchisement.

The campaign to discourage black voting was appallingly effective. In 1965, at least two thirds of eligible white citizens were registered to vote in every Southern state. Registration among eligible black citizens, meanwhile, ranged from a high of 37 percent, in South Carolina, to a low of 6 percent, in Mississippi. The 15,000 blacks in Dallas County, Alabama, where Selma is located, constituted about half of the voting-age population in 1964, but only 335 were registered to vote, even after multiple Justice Department lawsuits to correct blatant racial discrimination. Writing in the fall of that year, John Doar, a Justice Department lawyer,

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observed that “the litigation method of correction has been tried harder [in Dallas County] than anywhere else in the South” but had failed to deliver to blacks “the most fundamental of their constitutional rights—the right to vote.”

Although Congress passed civil-rights acts in 1957, 1960, and 1964, Southern segregationists and their allies succeeded in neutering the voting-rights provisions that survived the legislative cauldron. That situation changed dramatically in the spring of 1965, after scores of peaceful demonstrators on a march from Selma to Montgomery (among them John Lewis, who was the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at the time) were brutally clubbed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by state troopers enforcing Alabama governor George Wallace’s pledge that he was “not going to have a bunch of niggers” protesting along a highway in his state. Tapping into public outrage, Lyndon Johnson announced plans for new legislation to a joint session of Congress. He instructed Nicholas Katzenbach, his attorney general, to draft “the goddamdest toughest voting rights act that you can devise.”

The resulting law, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, had three key provisions. First, it suspended literacy tests and similar voting qualifications for five years in those areas in which racial disfranchisement had been most flagrant and pervasive. These were the so-called covered jurisdictions, which included the entire states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as most of North Carolina. Second, it required covered jurisdictions to obtain preclearance from federal authorities before imposing any new voting regulations. Finally, it authorized the attorney general to assign federal examiners to register qualified voters in the event that local officials proved recalcitrant. The act, which became law fifty years ago this month, marked the high tide of the civil-rights era.

**I**n *Give Us the Ballot*, his history of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the long-running campaign of re-

sistance against it, Ari Berman introduces readers to Ardies Mauldin, a resident of Selma who was the first person registered to vote thanks to the V.R.A. Twice rejected by local officials, Mauldin succeeded in registering with a federal examiner. So did Cager Lee, the grandfather of Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose death at the hands of state troopers galvanized the march that led to the standoff at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. So did Chris Weather- spoon, a black Louisianan who was rejected on five previous occasions by a parish official who had hung a poster behind his desk that labeled Martin Luther King Jr. a Communist.

More blacks were registered to vote during the first five years after the V.R.A. became law than were registered in the South during the century before its passage. Armed with the ballot, blacks were able to put pressure on white politicians, who could no longer wholly ignore them. Commenting on the act’s effects in 1974, Andrew Young—among the first black members of Congress from the South since 1901—observed:

It used to be Southern politics was just ... who could “outnigger” the other—then you registered 10 to 15 percent ... and folk would start saying “Nigra,” and then you get 35 to 40 percent registered and it’s amazing how quick they learned how to say “Nee-grow,” and now that we’ve got 50, 60, 70 percent of the black votes registered in the South, everybody’s proud to be associated with their black brothers and sisters.

Black voters made the difference in the presidential contest that pitted Gerald Ford against Jimmy Carter. Ford won the majority of white voters, but Carter won a sufficient number of liberated black voters to claim the White House (and to create a cliché, as commentators repeatedly remarked, that “hands that once picked cotton now picked a president”). Black electoral power played a large and perhaps decisive role in sinking Robert Bork’s 1987 bid for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, when black Southerners informed their senators that they distrusted Bork’s stance on matters of racial justice. Their impressions would not have mattered before the V.R.A.; in

its wake, however, their impressions mattered a lot. In 1965, nineteen of twenty Southern senators had opposed the V.R.A. In 1988, fourteen of twenty Southern senators voted against Bork.

The V.R.A.’s emancipation of the Southern black voter has done more than influence white officeholders; it has also led to the election of black officials. Six years after NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was shot to death outside his home clutching a bundle of T-shirts inscribed JIM CROW MUST GO, his brother Charles became mayor of Fayette, Mississippi. Selma, Alabama, and Philadelphia, Mississippi (where James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered during Freedom Summer, in 1964), are rightly associated with memories of white-supremacist despotism; both cities now have black mayors. In the states that the V.R.A. originally designated as covered, there has been a 1,000 percent increase in the number of African-American elected officials.

The V.R.A. has also changed the complexion of officeholders at the federal level. Andrew Young was elected to represent Georgia’s Fifth District in 1972. After he resigned to become Jimmy Carter’s ambassador to the U.N., the seat was filled by Wyche Fowler, a white Democrat with a strong record on civil rights, until John Lewis took it over in 1987. He has held it ever since. The year Lewis was elected, Mike Espy became the first black congressman from Mississippi since Reconstruction. In 1992, sixteen blacks were elected to the House of Representatives, thirteen of whom were from the South. All of them owed their seats to the V.R.A.

The most imposing monument to the influence of the V.R.A. is Barack Obama’s presidency. Obama is not indulging in flattery when he credits Lewis and the other heroes and heroines of the civil-rights movement with making his ascent possible; he is merely stating a fact. In the 2012 presidential election, African-American voter turnout exceeded white voter turnout in five of the six Southern states originally under special supervision by the V.R.A.

Since its birth, in 1965, the law has been reauthorized four times by





Congress, which extended it for five years in 1970, for seven in 1975, for twenty-five in 1982, and for another twenty-five in 2006. Along the way, the V.R.A. has simultaneously been broadened and strengthened. Alaska, Arizona, and Texas were added to the list of covered jurisdictions, along with most of New York City and some parts of California, Florida, Michigan, and South Dakota. Literacy and similar tests were permanently banned nationwide. Language minorities received new protections. Congress made it easier for plaintiffs to prove racial discrimination.

While acknowledging the V.R.A.'s success, Berman stresses that it has faced persistent opposition: "The V.R.A. didn't end the debate over voting rights, it started a new one.... It took decades of court battles, grassroots organizing efforts, and ground-breaking political campaigns to pro-

tect and expand the right to vote in the wake of the V.R.A."

As Berman recounts, white supremacists thwarted by the law immediately sought new means of perpetuating their monopoly on political power, resorting to schemes aimed at diluting blacks' voting strength. The Mississippi legislature gerrymandered district lines, splitting up concentrations of black voters. It reorganized jurisdictions, switching multimember districts that would have allowed the emergence of black officials in predominantly black areas to at-large districts in which a white majority could control every seat. It abolished some elected positions and changed others into appointive offices. Civil-rights lawyers succeeded in removing these racially motivated obstacles to African-American political empowerment, but doing so took time and required resources that could have been put to good use elsewhere.

Berman notes that Richard Nixon only reluctantly signed a reauthorization of the V.R.A., which he tried to curtail with low-visibility bureaucratic shenanigans. Ronald Reagan, who opposed all of the major civil-rights legislation of the 1960s, including the original V.R.A., was similarly reluctant to sign a reauthorization bill. His Justice Department declined to enforce the measures prescribed by the law against his Southern allies who continued to engage in racial discrimination. Political operatives in Louisiana, for example, without any participation by blacks, proposed congressional-district boundaries that would have fragmented the African-American electorate in New Orleans. One of these operatives was reported to have declared, "We already have a nigger mayor ... we don't need another nigger big shot." Career attorneys in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department recommended that the department object to



the proposed redistricting. Bradford Reynolds, Reagan's chief of the division and a singularly noxious influence whose evident hostility to the interests of black Americans later prompted the Senate to deny him a promotion to associate attorney general, rejected the recommendation. (Fortunately, a court halted the redistricting plan.)

The Reagan Administration trained and encouraged a cadre of lawyers who came increasingly to view the V.R.A. (at least as it had been interpreted by liberals) as an obsolete and unwelcome federal encroachment on the dignity of the states. One of those lawyers was John Roberts, the current chief justice of the Supreme Court and the author of the single biggest setback that the V.R.A. has yet suffered. On June 25, 2013, Roberts, writing for a 5–4 majority in the case of *Shelby County v. Holder*, announced that the Court had decided to invalidate Section 4 of the V.R.A., the provision that determines which jurisdictions are subject to the law's preclearance requirements. Quoting from the Court's prior validation of the V.R.A., he declared that the legislation

employed extraordinary measures to address an extraordinary problem ... entrenched racial discrimination in voting, "an insidious and pervasive evil which had been perpetuated in certain parts of the country through unremitting and ingenious defiance of the Constitution."

The V.R.A., he noted, was "strong medicine," but the court had earlier found that "exceptional conditions can justify legislative measures not otherwise appropriate." The problem, as the Court saw it, was that Congress had proceeded as if the conditions that justified the initial design of the V.R.A. had remained unchanged. In the Court's view, fifty years of progress—progress that owed much to the V.R.A. itself—called into question the validity of permitting most states to alter their voting procedures at will while requiring a small subset of states to obtain federal permission before making similar changes. Congress had failed to justify treating covered states more harshly than their uncovered counterparts, especially in light of higher rates of African-American voter turnout and

officeholding in covered jurisdictions than in many uncovered areas.

In her dissent, Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote that Section 4 of the V.R.A. should continue in force, unabated, as Congress preferred, because "continuance would facilitate completion of the impressive gains thus far made ... [and] continuance would guard against backsliding." Roberts chastised Congress for failing to recognize that "history did not end in 1965," while Ginsburg reproved him for ignoring that "what's past is prologue" and that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Moving on from quotations of Shakespeare and Santayana, Ginsburg settled on a homier formulation that prompted amens within the community of activists appalled by the *Shelby County* decision: "Throwing out preclearance," she wrote, "is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet." Whether or not to alter the V.R.A. was a judgment call, a matter of policy, which was Congress's prerogative. The Court was merely substituting its erroneous preferences for those of the Congress, and therefore belying the conservative dogma of judicial restraint.

Berman agrees with Ginsburg, but he attributes the Court's decision to something more nefarious than error. He portrays *Shelby County* as a shrewd and cynical example of judicial jujitsu—an essentially malevolent effort to destroy the V.R.A. with its own success:

The revolution of 1965 spawned an equally committed group of counter-revolutionaries [who] have waged a decades-long campaign to restrict voting rights. They have served in the highest echelons of power and, in recent years, controlled a majority on the Supreme Court. They have set their sights on undoing the accomplishments of the 1960s civil rights movement, including the V.R.A. The voting rights revolution and counter-revolution have been intertwined.

This counterrevolution, Berman writes, has been extended by a spate of laws enacted around the country in the aftermath of Obama's ascen-

sion to the White House, legislation that Berman describes as "old poison, new bottles." Justified as a defense against voter fraud—a negligible problem that Republicans portray as a major threat—these new laws make it more difficult for people to register to vote and to cast their ballots. The laws require prospective voters to produce not merely credible documentation that they are who they claim to be (say, a utility bill) but a form of state-issued documentation of the sort that millions of Americans do not possess and can obtain only with difficulty (a driver's license, a passport, a military I.D. card). Some of the new laws also require documentary proof of citizenship when registering to vote, do away with early voting, curb the ability of groups to conduct voter-registration drives, eliminate election-day registration, and make it harder for people with criminal convictions to have their voting rights restored.

"The election of the first black president and the resurrection of new barriers to the ballot box were not a coincidence," Berman writes. When black voter participation increased dramatically, white conservative Republicans reacted by making voting more difficult, and even by withdrawing support for procedures they formerly favored. The Republican Party in Florida, for example, once supported early voting. ("I think it's great," Jeb Bush declared in 2004.) But when the Obama campaign effectively mobilized early voters, many Republicans changed their attitude, and the Republican-dominated Florida legislature shrank the early-voting period from fourteen to eight days. (It subsequently re-extended the period in the first legislative session after the 2012 election.)

Berman portrays the new laws as an effective campaign of voter suppression that will affect enough votes to tip close elections—perhaps including a presidential contest. It is a campaign that he thinks is best understood in the context of a tragic and terrifying calamity that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century: the defeat of Reconstruction by the



bigots who successfully “redeemed” white supremacy:

After Obama’s election, the climax of decades of struggle to win greater representation, vote denial efforts returned with a vengeance. The high point of the Second Reconstruction spawned a Second Redemption backlash.

**B**erman writes dispatches for *The Nation* and other publications about contemporary battles over voting rights. I was predisposed to like his work: his heroes are my heroes; his villains are my villains; his politics are my politics. Why, then, did I feel let down by *Give Us the Ballot*? I expected that with more room to work Berman would be more ambitious and plunge deeper into his subject. Instead, his book is to a substantial extent a mere compilation of his magazine journalism. While it can be profitably read by anyone seeking basic information about the racial dimensions of voting-rights controversies, it fails to capture the complexity of the modern voting-rights struggle.

Berman gives woefully little attention to the internal conflicts among activists and thinkers who share his commitment to racial justice in electoral politics. Take the example of so-called majority-minority districting. In 1982, the V.R.A. was amended to mandate, under certain conditions, the creation of districts in which minorities would constitute a majority of the population. This reform has significantly contributed to the enlargement of black caucuses in Congress and state legislatures. But a dilemma has long shadowed the strategy: compressing black voters into “safe” districts for black candidates will have the effect of “whitening” adjacent districts. Moreover, packing a majority-minority district with black voters past the point at which blacks can exercise electoral control effectively wastes those extra votes and keeps them from other candidates—typically Democrats—who would eagerly appreciate them. The creation of majority-black districts may increase the number of black representatives in a legislature while lessening the overall political power of black voters. In predominantly white jurisdictions, blacks sometimes exercise influence as swing

voters, but that influence can be diminished or lost altogether through majority-minority districting.

These political dynamics have prompted Republican administrations to champion majority-minority districting, which has led to some odd coalitions and fratricidal disputes. When Berman criticizes white Republicans for engaging in segregative districting, however, he aims no criticism at black Democrats who have cooperated. In Berman’s depiction, black politicians and the community of progressives who are fighting the good fight for voting rights are unburdened by internal debates, questions, uncertainties, or dilemmas.

One reason for this blind spot may be Berman’s sourcing. He lists two pages of people he interviewed for his book—politicians, activists, lawyers, and academics (including me). I am sure that the interviews were useful, but I suspect that Berman would have gained a more nuanced understanding from some essential writings that are absent from his notes, writings that may have prompted him to a greater acceptance of complexity and paradox. Many readers drawn to *Give Us the Ballot* will be familiar with the outlines of the story Berman recounts, but they are less likely to be familiar with the knowledge available in scholarly books and articles. A journalist like Berman can perform a valuable service by canvassing that literature and bringing the best of it to the attention of general readers.

For example, Berman seems to assume that all voting-rights advocates share John Lewis’s view that the *Shelby County* decision was “a very sad and dark moment for our democracy.” Plenty do share that view, of course, but others do not. Commenting on the decision in the *Harvard Law Review*, Samuel Issacharoff—a legal scholar who worked on voting-rights legislation for the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and served as an attorney for both Obama presidential campaigns—compared Section 5 of the V.R.A. to an aging athlete, “one step too slow to carry the team.” He suggested that the Court had performed a bittersweet service by forcing it into retirement and expressed hope that voting-rights advocates would consider new mechanisms appropriate to a new era. Such

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mechanisms, Issacharoff believes, should  
no longer focus on "the historically cen-  
tral question of racial exclusion."

In Berman's narrative, it is incontro-  
vertible that racism is the overwhelm-  
ing force behind opposition to the  
V.R.A. and to the restrictive voting  
legislation that has emerged across the  
nation over the past several years. But  
Issacharoff believes that "the category  
of race increasingly fails to capture the  
primary motivation for what has be-  
come a battlefield in partisan wars." Notwithstanding the disproportional  
effects of contemporary voter suppres-  
sion on black and Latino voters, Issa-  
charoff contends that the main purpose  
of these efforts is political advantage,  
and he argues that recognizing this  
means focusing less on racial discrimi-  
nation and more on naked partisanship.

Guy-Uriel E. Charles and Luis  
Fuentes-Rohwer struck a similar, if less  
definite, note in the *Yale Law Journal*  
last year. They wrote that "in the cur-  
rent era we cannot say with any amount  
of certainty that the central problem of  
voting is race." Like Issacharoff, Charles  
and Fuentes-Rohwer are progressive  
legal scholars who see the V.R.A. as a  
justly celebrated device that contrib-  
uted mightily to the circumstances of  
its own declining pertinence. They  
view both the *Shelby County* decision  
and the Court that delivered it with  
skepticism, but they do not see the end  
of preclearance as the disaster that Ber-  
man bemoans. They write instead that  
the post-*Shelby County* "story of doom  
and gloom relies upon a view of the  
Supreme Court as a singularly conse-  
quential actor.... From our perspective,  
this story is too court-centric."

Of course, it is possible to recognize  
the partisanship behind restrictive  
legislation while maintaining that rac-  
ism is still the dominant motivation.  
And some activists believe, as does  
Berman, that it is preferable to empha-  
size the racial consequences of the new  
restrictions whatever the motivations  
behind them. But others—largely  
overlooked by Berman—contend that  
it is preferable to emphasize the parti-  
sanship that motivates the restrictions  
and to persuade the public and the  
courts that manipulating the rules of  
electoral competition for partisan rea-  
sons should be deemed intolerable. A  
book like Berman's ought to give read-

ers a fuller sense of these disagree-  
ments. The modern struggle for voting  
rights is too important to accept with-  
out complaint a book-length examina-  
tion that is this superficial.

The V.R.A. is unlikely to be rehabili-  
tated by Congress anytime soon; too  
many Republicans see no payoff in re-  
working it. Though they were willing to  
vote for reauthorization when they be-  
lieved it to be inevitable, they are un-  
willing to meet the Supreme Court's  
demand that Congress update the pre-  
clearance formula. There are all manner  
of sentiments behind this unwillingness,  
including several that are disturbing:  
selfishness, resentment, indifference,  
and racism. Fortunately, the V.R.A. has  
completed the main task it was designed  
to address. Societal changes have made  
inconceivable the recrudescence of  
wholesale, unambiguous racial disfran-  
chisement. It is possible, moreover, that  
the Supreme Court has done an inad-  
vertent favor to liberals. By sidelining a  
once-potent progressive device of declin-  
ing efficacy, it might spur fresh activism  
and prompt new thinking about ways to  
advance democratic aspirations in an  
America in which race continues to  
matter, albeit in unprecedented ways. ■

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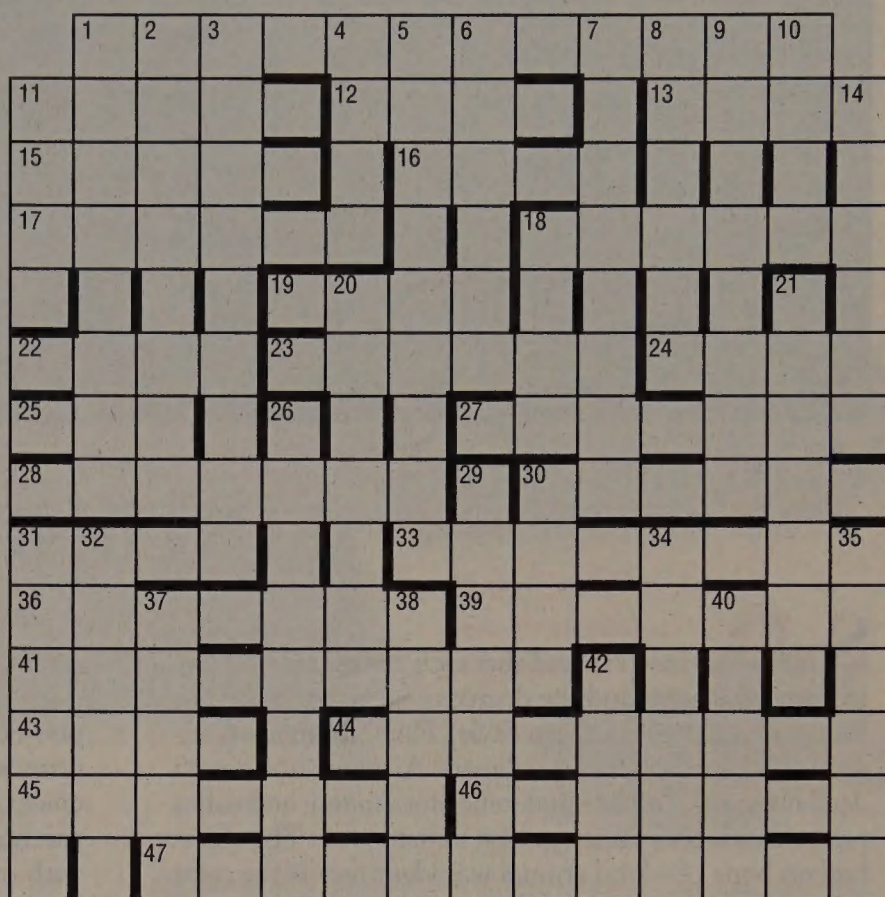
# PUZZLE

## RECONCILED

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

The entry at 1A, "with" the thirteen other unclued entries, will create a group of words that have something in common. The title of the puzzle has some significance.

Clue answers include seven proper nouns. 11A, 19A, 32D and 40D are uncommon. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 77.



### ACROSS

1. (see instructions—and the title of the puzzle) (4,8)
11. Italian flower gets name for French flower (5)
12. Man in the middle of St. Patrick's, doing a somersault (4)
13. Arab man returning from South American capital (4)
15. Cheap criminal, one bringing out the fuzz (5)
16. Frost recalled the title for "Prince of the Desert" (4)
17. (see instructions) (6)
18. (see instructions) (6)
19. Taro root, central to fodder, turned back (4)
22. What to eat when tide goes out? (4)
23. Cordial adjustment to ponder (6)
24. (see instructions) (4)
25. Lady of Rock announced. Not her! (3)
27. Some bombshells best docked outside, on leaving London (7)
28. Passes over developed regions (7)
30. Thorny situation for brother putting on airs, awkwardly (6)
31. Omits dropping the fourth pair of runners (4)
33. (see instructions) (8)
36. (see instructions) (7)
39. Renaissance makes English victory viral, circulating all around (7)
41. Unholy terrors, i.e., one raising a bit of hell (9)
43. On the outside, doctor can make a dollar from pot! (4)
44. Shot at, I'd alter having a lock at the back (9)
45. Small Siamese parts to be assembled, a number included (7)
46. (see instructions) (7)
47. Some commuters, finding roles reversed, they stay in the closet (12)

### DOWN

1. (see instructions) (8)
2. No arcane deconstruction for this poet (8)
3. Fliers prepare to shoot a gun at nothing—so upsetting (9)
4. Get rent drop (4)
5. Show inappropriate habits? Cover Dre's solo entry (9)
6. (see instructions) (6)
7. \_\_\_\_\_ watch TV? Bedtime dilemma for man in ring! (8)
8. (see instructions) (6)
9. Dorothy's aunt and father receive nothing in turnover (8)
10. What dentists do doesn't begin with stream of water (4)
11. Downloaded things heard during recess (4)
14. (see instructions) (6)
18. Ring up Kitty (4)
20. Seed men spilled in place of the Lord (7)
21. Lasting through complete RNA labeling (7)
26. Upper-class item in chicken: more crackers (8)
29. (see instructions) (7)
30. He boxed naked, they say (4)
31. (see instructions) (6)
32. OK, nail disreputable china maker (6)
34. (see instructions) (6)
35. Good woman's name? (6)
37. Swings still moving (5)
38. Get to show gravity with a grating voice (5)
40. Love performing? Time to enter horse-show movement (5)
42. God, in the woods, is cooler after receiving a kind of turn (4)

**Contest Rules:** Send completed diagram with name and address to "Reconciled," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by August 7. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the October issue. The winner of the June puzzle, "Diametricode," is Lawrence Andreas, Medford, Ore.





## FINDINGS

**S**tudies continued to find that e-cigarettes are harmful in numerous ways, and the degree of harm varies among Banana Pudding (Southern Style), Hot Cinnamon Candies, and Menthol Tobacco flavors. Airplane noise at 85 decibels induces a taste preference for umami, and cabin pressure induces a preference for tomato juice. The oldest broken bone of a land animal was identified as the right radius of a tetrapod who fell from a height of at least 85 centimeters 333 million years ago. The earliest evidence of human-on-human violence, from 430,000 years ago, was discovered in Spain. Baboon abuse was common among the upper classes of pre-pharaonic Hierakonpolis. One third of all floods in the southwestern Netherlands in the past half-millennium were acts of war. In Hawaii, a man and a swordfish stabbed and killed each other. “The whole harbor was scared of him,” said the man’s sister-in-law. Endangerment may be driving the small-tooth sawfish to parthenogenesis. The moonfish was found to be warm-blooded. Parakeets are the only non-mammals to yawn contagiously. Rogue waves are not totally unpredictable.

**T**he larynx muscles of mice, the opioid receptors of human brains, and memories that have been lost through amnesia can all be activated with light. Boys who smoke marijuana go through puberty earlier than nonsmoking boys but are 4.6 inches shorter by age twenty. Pedophiles selected for study by taking a volume-based phallometric test for erotic preference were likelier to be left-handed and to have congenital facial malformities, and less likely to have malformed extremities. Fecal samplings by Linda Vigilant found negligible levels of inbreeding between mountain gorilla fathers and daughters, in part because the daughters avoid mating with males who are old enough to be their fathers. Evolutionary biologists who enforced monogamy among flour beetles over fifty generations theorized why males and sex are necessary. The first fraction of human ejaculate contains the best

sperm, while the remainder exists mostly to foil competition. Altruistic children tend to be healthier but from poorer families. Autistic Norwegians confess to their crimes. German psychoinformaticians analyzed the emotional range of *Forrest Gump*. Britons who are both psychotic and autistic are more empathetic than those with only one of the two conditions. Bipolar Brazilians tend to possess three or more of the following attributes: at least two apparent tattoos, at least three foreign languages, at least three religion changes, at least three marriages, at least sixty lifetime sexual partners, regular infidelity, circadian dysregulation, heavy cursing, high debt, and pathological love; if they are male, they are more likely than unipolar Brazilians to have a talent for poetry, and if they are female, they are more likely to read frequently and dress extravagantly.

**M**en who smell a T-shirt recently worn by a fertile woman drink more nonalcoholic beer. Periodic text messages improve teenage girls’ compliance with injection-based birth control. Male New Zealand pea crabs, who live alone in green-lipped mussels, spend hours tickling the lips of a female’s mussel to gain admittance and mate with her. Burmese long-tailed macaques in Thailand favor one-handed strikes with sharp stones to crack open sessile rock oysters. Brown thornbills attacked by pied currawongs mimic the cries of *Accipiter* hawks. The powerful are desensitized to injustices affecting others but hypersensitive to injustices affecting themselves. Intermittent declines in the use of prosocial language by members of Congress between 1996 and 2014 were linked to decreases in approval ratings. Prosocial behavior was observed in subjects who were awed, variously, by footage of droplets of colored water falling into a bowl of milk, slowed down 200 times; by footage of “threatening natural phenomena” such as tornadoes and volcanoes; and by standing in a grove of 200-foot-tall Tasmanian eucalyptus trees. ■

“Wilderness’s Soul I,” a photogram mounted on linen, by Zhang Dali. Courtesy Peking Fine Arts, Beijing and Hong Kong



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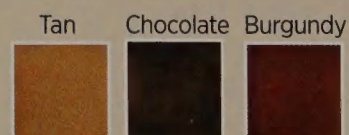
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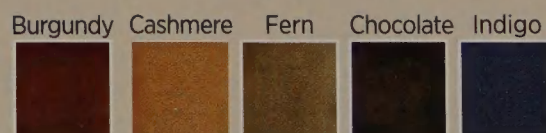
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